

BLUE

LIFE,
ART
& STYLE
IN
NEWARK



Perseverance and grace
in the face of adversity
*Virginia Murphy and her son
Albert, godfather of Club Music*

EDITED BY GARY JARDIM



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Blue

NEWARK CULTURE / VOLUME TWO

EDITED BY GARY JARDIM

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In Memory of

Al Murphy, Marvin Davis, Larry Patterson and Bobby White

And to

Virginia, Darryl and Ace



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Foreword

As I wrote in the first Volume of *Blue*, this book is about culture as the shared experience of everyday life. Newark remains a troubled city, but as this book shows, it is a site of rich cultural expression, and it is a pleasure to bring together so many fine elements in these pages. *Blue* takes its cue from the ways in which people have figured out how to persevere in situations of absurdity, so we are not gonna bow to the strange hype that pictures Newark as the Renaissance City. We need a new agenda in this town, a sense of moral urgency, a political upsurge. We hope *Blue* is a small step in that direction.

The kindness and generosity and faith of the contributors to this book has made this an especially rewarding project for me. We all owe a debt of thanks to Virginia Murphy for the way she kept the faith and remained loyal to the spirit of her son. Special thanks has to go out to Ace Mungin and Darryl Rochester, without whom the story of Al Murphy and his contributions to life in Newark might have been lost. Guys, keep the faith.

It's been gratifying to see Jimmy Scott and Nathan Heard, two of our favorite sons, get a chance to express their art on a grander scale. Jimmy's grammy-nominated album has finally brought him to a larger audience, and we are elated that the world will get the chance to dig the depths of what this man does. Nathan has been neglected for way too long, but the good news is that Amok Books in Los Angeles has just reprinted *Howard Street*. Later this year they will reprint Nathan's 1974 novel, *A Cold Fire Burning*, and next year they will reprint *House of Slammers*, his prison novel. "Sang Pruitt" is excerpted from his almost-completed novel *Summer's Fall*, which explores one man's return to Newark and his struggle to fulfill the lost promises of the '60s and '70s.

—Gary Jardim

Fiction

Sang Pruitt

"**B**utterflies don't come 'round here anymore," Sang Pruitt said. Her voice was low and matter-of-fact, as if her sudden observation was not puzzling to her two young companions. But they were puzzled; and Sang's enigmatic smile didn't help interpret her meaning. Their eyes followed hers across the narrow, cobblestone street to the vacant lot where Moscovitz Brothers Roofing Supplies once had stood.

Fourteen-year old Cody Pruitt spoke first:

"So what?"

His sister Cora, who was a year older, said: "Where'd they go?"

"Someplace else," Sang said. She was sixteen, and a leader to her cousins who lacked her inquisitiveness if not the daring she more often showed. She was also the most prudent of the trio; she kept them from meandering too far into teen-aged mischief from which their mothers might extract them with the exquisite pain of a leather belt like the one that hung upon the doorknob of Sang's mother's bedroom door. The belt was seldom used, but the memories of those few times when it had been used usually served as a potent enough deterrent.

Cora and Cody looked at each other and laughed.

"Well . . . ?" Sang challenged. "When's the last time either of y'all seen one 'round here? I betcha y'all didn't even notice that all the butterflies just," she snapped her slender fingers, "took off."

"What the hell you talkin' 'bout, Sang?" Cody said.

Cora, an incessant gum-popper, merely shrugged her thin shoulders and waited for an explanation.

"I saw one the other day," Cody challenged back. "What about that?"

"You know you lyin'," Sang said.

Cody leapt down from the stairs of the wooden porch upon which they were seated. "I am not!"

The girls remained seated on the steps of a two-story wood-frame house. They didn't live there—an old retired couple did—but the house seemed to draw most kids in the neighborhood to it . . . an urban neighborhood over-run with tenements and projects, but with a kind of anachronistic desire to preserve something of a pastoral easy-going ambience virtually unattainable in a crowded city. The old couple didn't seem to mind the puerile romances and games that the neighborhood kids indulged in, as long as the noise and excitement didn't become too raucous . . . as it sometimes did. Mostly, though, the young people showed respectful appreciation for their enclave. Around the corner, where Sang, Cody and Cora lived in a four-story tenement, the comings and goings of residents (and others of unknown intent and purpose) meant that peace and privacy were at a premium.

Cody stood halfway between the porch-steps and the curb, jabbing his cocoa-brown finger towards the vacant lot. "I saw a butterfly right there!" he insisted.

Both girls knew his vehemence usually meant absolutely nothing, except another attempt to overpower them.

Sang's expression was haughty. Cora giggled, popped her gum and said:

"Cody, you know what happens to little boys who tell lies on butterflies, doncha?"

"I'm not lyin'!" But his scrunched face and up-raised eyebrows belied his words.

Cora leaned over and whispered into Sang's ear, and the two of them leaned back upon the stairs in convulsive laughter. It was designed to infuriate Cody. He jammed his hands into his pants pockets and turned his stiffened back on them. Then he walked to the curb, picked up a small stone and flung it across the street, where it landed, kicking up a little puff of dust, in the middle of the lot. He turned to face them:

"There!" he said. "I saw the butterfly right where that stone landed."

When the girls continued laughing he allowed his shoulders to sag a bit. "Okay. So maybe I didn't see it in that exact spot . . . and maybe it was a week ago instead the other day. But I betcha neither one of y'all knows *exactly* when certain things happened all this summer, either." He walked towards them, plopped himself down between them and looked at his sister. "So what happens to boys who tells lies on butterflies?"

Cora pointed at his unzipped pants. "The same thing that happened

to Pinocchio's nose—except it's their ding-a-lings that gets too big, and their flies won't stay closed."

Embarrassed, Cody hurriedly tried to fix his broken zipper.

"You got any drawers on this mornin', Cody?" Sang teased.

Struggling with his zipper, Cody said, "I'm gon' tell aunt Inez you out here in the streets talkin' under people's clothes."

"Ain't no worse than lyin'."

He finally got the zipper fixed. The hot, August day, and his embarrassment, had raised tiny beads of sweat on his forehead. Before he could speak, Sang said:

"Let's go up to Eighteenth Avenue swimming pool."

"What for?" Cora said. "We can't go in. Mamma said so."

"We can watch," Sang said.

"That's right," Cody agreed. "She said we couldn't go in—she didn't say we couldn't watch. It's too hot to just sit around here. Ain't nothin' to do. The water could cool us off, too."

Cody grabbed his sister's arm and pulled at her. She jumped from the steps and landed on his foot.

"Didn't hurt," he said, glaring at her. He was almost a full head taller than she. Sang, however, was taller than he.

They started in the direction of the swimming pool, but had gone only a few steps when Sang suddenly stopped.

"What's the matter?" Cody said.

She stared at him. "Did you really see a butterfly? Tell the truth, now."

"I told you I did."

Cora looked at his fly and giggled. He glared at her again.

Sang said, "Show me where."

"Whachoo mean?"

"Show me proof?"

"How you expect me to do that?"

Sang took his arm. Cora flanked him, and they headed towards the lot. He allowed himself to be pulled along between them for only a few yards before demanding again how he was supposed to prove he'd seen a butterfly. Neither girl spoke until they were all standing at the edge of the garbage-strewn tract of land.

"Now, go in there and point out the spot where you saw it," Sang said. "And if you don't, I'm not gonna loan you the money to get that new suit to wear to the Community Center dance Saturday."

"You'll be the raggedyest dude there, too," Cora added. She punctuated her words with a double gum-snap.

They knew that he had finally worked up the nerve to ask Christine Miller to go to the dance with him after nearly a month of anxiety and indecision. He'd been ecstatic when Christine accepted his invitation—which he then proceeded to brag about to all his friends. Now, the thought of not having a new suit (for which he'd saved up nearly enough money to buy) brought near-panic to his face.

"You *promised* to loan me fifteen dollars," he said.

"I don't have to keep promises to liars," Sang sneered at him.

"How you expect me to show you proof?"

She waved him towards the lot, which had become a local dump full of now abandoned things that had once been a source of pride and hope. There were old, rusted stoves, broken refrigerators, pieces of air-conditioners, a couple of gutted automobiles, countless shards of glass. There were rimless tires, bicycle parts, large, rain-soaked cardboard boxes, empty cans, tons of bricks. Small wooden crates that served as chairs were piled around fifty-gallon oil drums with holes punched in their sides—used in the winter months, to hold fires to warm those who had no homes, or didn't want to go home. At least two dead bodies had been found among the multitudinous debris: one died of exposure, the other's head had been flattened by a truck battery.

He went about ten feet into all this before Cody turned, imploringly, to Sang.

"Bring the proof—or no suit," she said.

He cast a baleful eye at the surrounding devastation, took a few steps forward, and let out an angry howl as his shoe found proof of a dog's presence. Cody cursed and scraped his shoes against a patch of loose dirt until the crusty mess looked cleaned-off. "See what y'all made me do?"

"A lie made you do it," Cora shouted at him.

He ignored her. "I don't know how I can prove it, Sang. But it was right around this spot somewhere."

Sang was smiling. "You sure?"

He scoped the area, then nodded.

"Well, bring the evidence," she ordered.

"There ain't no damn evidence!" Anger screeched from his constricted throat. "Ain't nothin' 'round here but garbage and dog shit!"

"Don't butterflies eat?" Sang said.

"Yeah, sure—so what?"

"Well, find some butterfly shit and bring it here—then we'll believe you saw one!"

She took off running, with Cora right on her heels. Cody took at least

ten seconds before realizing that he'd been made a fool of. Then he began cursing. He picked up some small stones and hurled them after the fleeing girls, but they were too far away. He took off after them, determined to catch up and knowing he wouldn't because they were too far gone. Sang could out-run him anyway. Their derisive laughter slapped against his burning ears. Just as he passed a tall patch of weeds a butterfly flitted up and almost caused him to fall. He grabbed a handful of weeds and flung it at the insect. Hopeless. He began to jog after the girls at a slow pace.

By the time Cody got to the swimming pool, Sang and Cora were standing outside the chain-link fence chatting blithely to a group of girls standing inside. He was relieved to see that Christine Miller was not among the group. He strolled up to them with an air of confidence, hoping that they hadn't told anyone about the trick they'd played on him. Cora looked at him, as if to determine whether or not he was really angry. Sang hardly seemed to notice him. She continued her conversation, knowing that the money for the suit and the opportunity to style for his friends, and Christine Miller, would outweigh any anger he felt towards her.

Cody stopped a few feet away and called to her. Sang walked over to him.

"Okay," he said. "I lied—satisfied?"

Sang grinned at him sweetly. "I was gonna let you have the money anyway." She returned to her friends.

"That's dry," he said, sotto voice, then called after her: "That's real dry, Sang."

He went to join several boys who were standing outside the fence talking about the up-coming dance on Saturday, and pointing out the girls inside the pool with whom they were going to dance slow and close. The succulent ones who almost overwhelmed their bikinis were the first choices.

The most popular route home from the swimming pool took the kids past Dugan's Bakery, and a small, independent pickle factory on Livingston Street. Both places sold their goods at wholesale prices—well within the average kid's spending range. The bitter sodium of the pickles seemed to off-set the effects of the chlorinated pool water. And the odors wafting from the bakery simply smelled too good to resist. Sang, Cody and Cora bought donuts.

They were still chomping away on mouthfuls of soggy dough when they got to Charlton Street and encountered Biggy Bosco and his gang

walking towards them.

"Aw-shit!" Cody exclaimed through a mouthful of suddenly dry dough. He spat it into the gutter.

"Just keep on walkin'," Sang said. "We ain't botherin' them."

Biggy Bosco usually wore a vest, but no shirt. He had named the gang the Vested Interests. All of them wore vests, some with shirts. They operated out of a clubhouse in the basement of an abandoned building where they gave parties to which they sold tickets, whether other kids wanted to buy them or not. The parties' main features were dim lights, marijuana, crack cocaine, loud music and cheap, chemical wine.

Cora became nervous. "Let's cross the street," she said. "They always messin' with people."

"No," Sang said. "Just act like they ain't even there."

"I ain't scared of them," Cody said.

Cora closed her donut-bag, took her used chewing gum from the back of her hand and popped it into her mouth, where it began to sound like the report of a cap pistol. "There's six of 'em. Spoze they start somethin'?"

Sang looked at her angrily. "If you're scared, go ahead and cross over."

"They don't own the sidewalk," Cody said. "We mindin' our own business."

Cora snapped her gum and walked along with them.

The gang continued towards the trio as if their reputation for petty crime and bullying were a force-field. Their strutting became exaggerated. They were a force, of sorts, for they were at least organized. In a neighborhood such as the Central Ward, survival on almost any terms had long since become a symbol of power—the way "black is beautiful" had once been powerful symbolism; a virtue and, in and of itself, able to guarantee positive eventualities.

The Vested Interests were prime examples of the many mixed messages young people received from a marginal existence in the modern Babylon to which their elders had consigned them. So the gang created pride and power in a social vacuum and played by their own rules. Their only redeeming characteristic lay in their youth; but kids didn't seem to remain young for very long—a dozen years, perhaps.

Biggy Bosco motioned to the other five boys, and they quickly took up the entire sidewalk as they drew near to Sang, Cody and Cora. They all met in front of a ramshackle wood-frame house, now weathered to a dingy grey, with great patches of peeling paint, and a concrete stoop that had large chunks missing from its steps. An old man of perhaps sixty

years sat in a chair smiling benignly at the broken windows of an abandoned factory across the street. His porch seemed on the verge of collapse.

Sang knew that she was not about to provoke Biggy and his boys, but she was also determined not to be pushed around. The two groups met in front of the old man's house and he pulled his memories from halcyon days. He smiled down at them, and was ignored by them.

Sang wasn't about to step into the street and concede the sidewalk, but she did try to keep from bumping anybody as she made room for the Vested Interests to pass. The gang, however, closed ranks.

"Wha's'appenin', y'all?" Biggy drawled.

"What's the deal?" Cody responded.

"Been swimmin'?" Biggy said, and handed the reefer he was smoking to a boy called Dap.

"No," Sang said. "Good-bye."

Biggy ignored her and spoke directly to Cody. "Whacha got in the bag, bro'?"

"Donuts," Cody replied.

"From Dugan's?" Biggy said. "I heard their shit got maggots in it. That's why they sell 'em so cheap."

Sang spoke up again. "Ain't nobody ask you to eat 'em, did they?"

Cora tried to look unconcerned. But the gum in her mouth sounded like a woodpecker had taken up residence there.

Biggy held out his hand towards Cody. "Lemme see the bag." The other boys took that as a signal and surrounded the trio.

Cody made no move to comply with the demand. Sang took the bag from his hand and held it along with hers. "Buy your own donuts, Biggy Bosco," she said.

Biggy stepped back and allowed a lazy, threatening smile to smolder behind his eyes. He tightened his fists and set his arm muscles rippling with the strength of prime youthfulness.

"You always act like a tough bitch. Now, I'm not only takin' his bag—I'm takin' yo's too . . ."

The old man on the porch called out: "Stop pickin' on them young'uns. They ain't botherin' nobody. Y'all oughta learn how t'git along with one 'nother—"

Dap shouted back: "Shut the fuck up and mind yo' bizness, ol' man!"

Another of the Vested Interests, who looked to be about twelve-years old, threatened: "We'll take yo' shit too, you ol' wino!"

"You won't git away with it," the old man said. "Lil' niggas like y'all

needs puttin' away."

The gang members all laughed derisively until Biggy stopped them. He stepped towards the stoop, pointing a finger at Cody. "How you know he don't owe me, pops? Maybe you oughta stay in an ol' man's place . . ."

"I don't owe you nothin'!" Cody shouted.

The old man smiled at him. "I believe you, son. I knows how these hoodlums operate. They come by here all the time messin' with folks."

Biggy turned to Cody. "You steppin' to me, man? You ready to gamble, or what?" His look fluctuated between smug contempt and lip-biting enragement. Then he suddenly leapt upon the porch in an attempt to bluff the old man with a gorilla act.

The old man didn't move, however. His rheumy eyes examined Biggy's menacing face. "I done lived too long t'be scared, boy. Now git off my property."

Biggy, used to people acting with trepidation at his posturing, was surprised. Nevertheless, he put his face close to the man's and said:

"You git yo' ass inside before I fuck you up—you understand?"

"Fuck'im up!" Dap encouraged.

"Kick his ass, Biggy!" another youngster shouted.

Sang spoke up loud enough for everyone to hear. "Ain't they brave, Cora? They wanna beat up an old man."

Her contempt provoked Biggy. He stepped towards the old man. "Git outta that chair!"

"My chair, my home—you git," the old man said. "You got no rights here." He was wearing a tattered navy P-jacket and put his hands inside the pockets.

"If you don't git up by the time I count t'three," Biggy threatened, "I'm gon' show you what rights I got."

The old man nodded and stirred himself. Softly, he said: "Okay. Don't want no strong young buck like you jumpin' on my arthritic old bones." But he didn't get up. He merely smiled.

Biggy was so wrapped in his bravado that it took a while to realize the man wasn't getting up. Then he began to count:

"One!"

"I don't move as fast as I used to, y'know. Like you keep remindin' me—I'm an old man."

"Two!" Biggy snapped.

Now the old man, using the arm-rest, lifted himself with one arm, but kept his right hand inside his jacket.

Biggy's evil grin widened. "Two-and-a-half! You got one more second before you meet yo' doom—"

"Or you meet yo's," the old man said. His tone was almost apologetic. He removed his right hand from his pocket. He stood up and let the hand hang hidden by his side in the classic gesture suggesting a weapon. "You know you got to bring ass t'git ass, doncha?"

The implied threat, the stark determination in the man's voice, caught Biggy off-guard. He stepped back, pointing at the hidden hand. But his bravado remained intact. "I don't give a shit if you got a weapon. I'll make you eat it."

The old man showed his purple gums. "No teeth," he said.

Biggy rocked forward on the balls of his feet as if testing the man's reaction, or to make him show what he had in his hand. The man didn't move, except to thrust out his grizzled grey chin; his mouth compressed until his lips almost disappeared. Yet there was also a look of compassion on his face.

"You ain't movin' out fast enough, ol' man. Here come the final countdown."

"I'm gon' move at my own pace, boy, 'cause I don't want no trouble. But I want you to leave them young'uns alone, hear?"

Biggy was suddenly flushed with relief. He didn't know if there was a gun in the old man's hand, and was glad that he wouldn't have to find out the hard way.

"Well, just move fast," he said.

Dap called out: "Make 'im run, Biggy!"

"I said I was goin' move," the old man repeated. "But I sho-nuff ain't runnin'."

Biggy jumped to the ground, triumph showing on his broad face. "Long as you git t'gittin', pops."

"And if I don't move fast enough, do yo'self a favor, hear?"

"What favor is that?" Biggy said.

"If I don't move but a mile-a-month—don't you catch me," he warned and walked inside the house. "And I'm callin' the law on y'all hoodlums, right now."

The youngest gang member slapped Biggy's out-stretched hand. "You chilled that ol' mothafucka right out, baby."

The rest of the Vested Interests high-fived each other.

"Betcha he'll mind his own business from now on . . ."

Sang spoke up: "We gotta go home—c'mon Cora; c'mon Cody. It's gettin' late."

Biggy pushed Cody, then turned on Sang. "I ain't lettin' this smart-mouth bitch go nowhere 'til I'm ready!"

"You better!" Cora said. "That man said he was gonna call the police."

Biggy's hand dipped into his pocket and came out filled with a sportsman knife that had a nine-inch blade. The rest of the gang did the same. They tightened the ring around the trio.

"Bring 'em along," Biggy ordered.

With knives at their throats and a gang member at each arm, Sang, Cody and Cora were marched across the street and down towards the end of the empty factory until they came to a break in the chain-link fence. They were pushed through the fence and into the darkened building where no one from the outside would be able to see them. For the first time Sang felt more fear than anger, as she pictured in her mind what was going to happen. She, like everyone in the neighborhood, knew the rip-off tactics associated with the Vested Interests. The dim surroundings of the gutted industrial behemoth was ghostly. The further they went inside, the more otherworldly everything seemed to appear. She heard Cora crying as if from a distance. Cody was talking, but she couldn't make out what the words were.

Although it was broad daylight they hadn't seen anyone other than the old man. Would he call the police? Had he seen where they had been taken? This was a deserted area of the city. Urban renewal was planned, but not yet begun. No one was around. They were in the middle of a big city, but no one was around, except squirrels and a few birds chirping in the canopies of the scraggly birch trees that lined the long block. Even the pickle factory was scheduled to relocate soon. A half-starved dog ran past them and out of the building, barking its protest at the invasion of his territory. The final irony of it was that there was a police precinct right around the corner on Seventeenth Avenue.

Sang broke away from the grasp of Biggy. "I ain't goin' no further!" she angrily declared. She didn't try to run away. It didn't occur to her to leave her cousins in the hands of the gang. She put her back against a rusted old machine and stood ready for battle, not even thinking about what might happen to her. Yet fear touched every part of her sensate body. Her legs seemed barely able to hold her upright, and her vision blurred into the surreal background of dust particles filtering through the dank air. She couldn't pick out faces in the murky light. Eyes, nostrils and mouths were like black holes . . . sink-holes that could swallow them all up. There was a hole in her consciousness too, threatening to turn her

inside out.

Biggy was smiling. He closed his knife and put it into his vest-pocket. The smile didn't reach his eyes, however. They were unyielding. "I'ma deal with this skeezer bitch right now," he said.

Cody and Cora both yelled: "Leave her alone!"

Biggy moved closer to Sang, his fist balled. "You need to be taught a lesson, and I'm the mothafucka who gon' do it. You need t'be fucked—is you a virgin still? Do yo' pussy stink?"

Sang stood stiffly against the cold machine while Biggy closed in on her, feigning punches and bobbing like a mongoose after a snake. Each reflexive dodge he made was greeted by hoots of derision from the gang. Cora and Cody struggled helplessly. But the knives were held so close to their throats that they could feel the blades' sharpness each time they swallowed.

Biggy feigned another punch, then suddenly slapped Sang so hard across the face that she was momentarily made deaf. Her head banged against the machine. She almost went down, but maintained her balance until the large room stopped spinning. She couldn't see anything but multifarious pinpoints of light hurtling at her out of inky darkness. Biggy slapped her again. She came back to the world of light and found herself on the dirty concrete floor looking up at his elongated fuzzy figure standing triumphantly over her.

"Whacha got to say now, you fuckin' who'e!" he shouted down at her. "Ain't so fuckin' hot now, is ya? I could eliminate yo' fuckin' ass without even thinkin' 'bout it."

Sang tried to speak; to unleash her defiance upon him. But her jaw felt unhinged, as if the most fragile words would cause it to break. Muffled clicks of gristle and bone echoed inside her head like plastic-wrap. Yet as her vision cleared her anger grew until it replaced the shock, if not the pain. Humiliation and outrage surged within her, and grew as she saw Cora being yoked by one of the boys. Cora's face was covered with tears, mucous oozed from her nose. Cody was bleeding from a small cut on his neck, and another on the side of his jaw.

The voices of the Vested Interests filled the cavernous room with cacophonous encouragement. They were making woofing noises that bespoke a victorious enjoyment.

A distant whine inside Sang's head came at her with a Doppler-like effect and whizzed towards some far region of her mind. Two of the gang pinned her down. She heard Biggy say:

"I'ma take her drawers off . . ."

Cody tried not to look as Biggy lifted Sang's skirt and fumbled with her panties, in order to tear them off. Cody closed his eyes, but instinct and curiosity made him open them again. They were stronger than his fear and embarrassment. But not stronger than his guilt, as he looked at Sang's supple thighs and suddenly remembered the times when he'd tried to sneak looks at her whenever they'd spent the night at each other's homes. Boyish mischief, however, could not compare to this terrible reality. He began to cry, unabashed, unashamed, with deep wrenching anger.

Cora was trying to squirm out of the grasp of the two boys who held her, but it was hopeless. Her stomach heaved; she retched, on the verge of vomiting.

Sang twisted about on the dust-laden floor unaware of the bruises and lacerations resulting from all the debris, including glass and tin and myriad other objects littering the floor. She was no match for the stronger, bigger boys. Biggy slapped her again and planted his bulk on her legs to keep her from kicking him. Then he got out his knife. He opened it with one hand and prepared to cut away her underpants. Cora suddenly spewed the contents of her stomach onto him and onto Sang as well.

"You nasty bitch!" Biggy shouted. "This a fuckin' new vest!"

His distraction caused him to relax and Sang kicked him off of her. She snatched one arm away from the startled Dap and hit Biggy squarely on his nose with her fist. He dropped the knife, but held her so that she still could not get completely free. She heard herself screaming. It tore out of her, and Biggy seemed to get progressively lighter. The scream continued and Biggy seemed to get even more buoyant, as if her very voice was lifting him. She was surprised to find herself suddenly on her knees. Then she and Biggy were again rolling along the floor, grappling with each other like two insects in the wind. They rolled over and over, and back again to the spot where they'd begun. She tried to bite him and then to scratch him, though her fingernails were bitten almost to their quicks and useless as weapons. Biggy, startled, knew that he was in the struggle of his young life, but the rest of his gang seemed unaware of it. They were flush with excitement.

"Ride that bitch, Biggy!" The youngest boy hooted. He got on his knees like a wrestling referee, banging the floor with the palm of his hand.

"One! Two! Nope, she ain't pinned yet . . ."

"Woof! Woof!" Suddenly, Biggy was yelping in pain. "Get this bitch off'a me! *Somebody git her off . . .*"

Sang had an arm securely around his neck in a hug that, under different circumstances, might have seemed like an embrace. The two were cheek to cheek with Biggy on top. He was flailing his arms about, not trying to punch her, but trying to push away from her. Beneath him, Sang was doing the punching, driving blow after blow into his stomach. With each punch Biggy's body jerked upward. He put both hands on the floor and tried to push away, lifting them both up a few inches in the process, until his strength gave out and they plopped back down again. He seemed to be getting weaker while Sang appeared to get stronger.

"*Somebody help me!*" Biggy said. Everyone, including Cody and Cora, was momentarily taken aback, incredulous at what they were hearing.

"Hey!" Dap said. "He for *real!*"

"Please git her offa me. . ." Biggy said weakly.

"She ain't on *you*, man—you the one on the top."

Before anyone could break them apart, Sang released Biggy. He rolled away from her and lay belly up, exposing his blood-soaked stomach and new vest which had been punctured at least a half-dozen times by his own knife. Everyone was frozen in astonishment until Dap, with a trembling index finger, pointed at Biggy's wounds. His panic came out so prano:

"She done killed Biggy, y'all!"

With smiles still frozen on their faces the others let their hands drop away from their prisoners and stood like awe-struck totems watching Biggy writhing about on the floor. They were only galvanized into action when Cody said:

"Better get him to a hospital before he kicks!"

He and Cora rushed over to Sang, who clutched the bloody knife. She had a vacant smile on her face. Cora had to pry her fingers from around the knife-handle. Cody examined her face where Biggy had slapped her. It was beginning to swell.

"You alright, Sang?" Cora asked.

Sang looked at her calmly, smiled, and said:

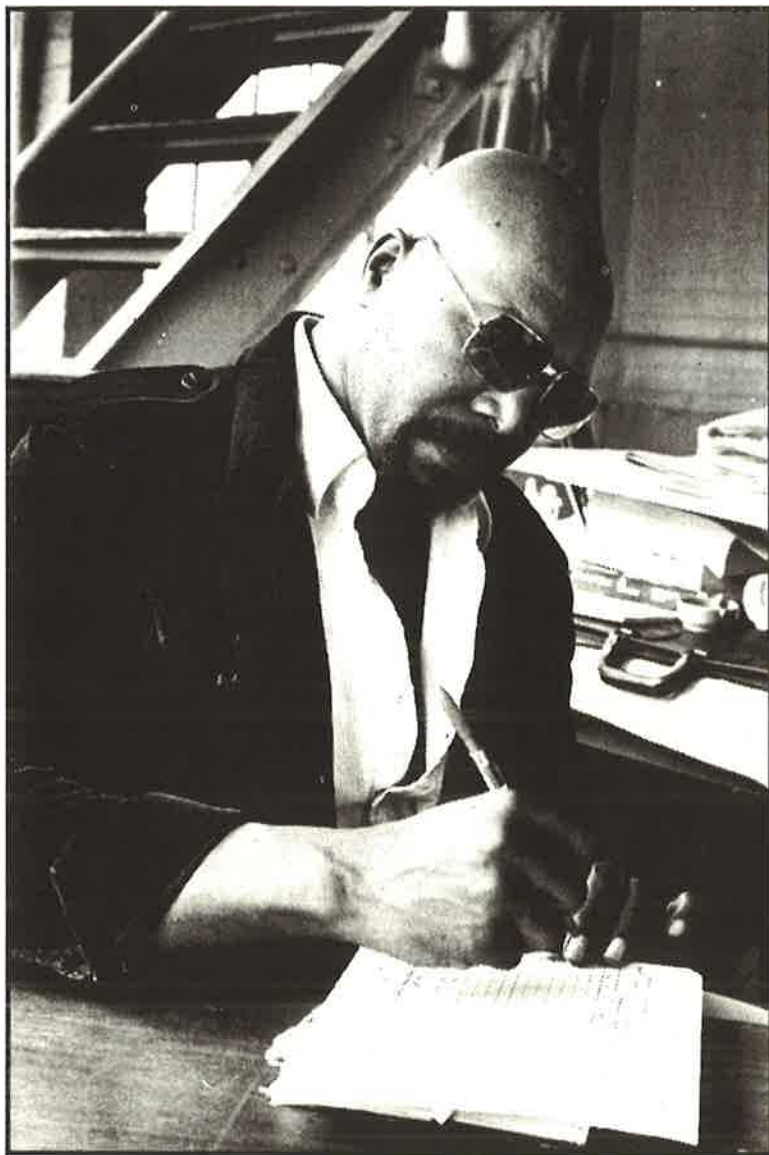
"I'm fine."

The Vested Interests led their leader away while Sang, Cody and Cora stood huddled together and watched them depart.

"Let's go home," Cora sniffled.

They waited until the gang was well away before they left the building. They were all three crying, but they were smiling, too.

Interview



INTERVIEW

The Life and Art of Nathan C. Heard

At what point did you become a writer?

I became a writer when I went to prison. I started writing in jail. Writing letters for guys.

What year was that?

Well, it actually started in Annandale, when I was eighteen years old, writing letters for guys. First, because I had nice penmanship. Second, 'cause I could lie a lot to the girls. That's what they mainly were—love letters.

But during the course of passing from reformatory to prison, I began to write more and more letters, to guys' lawyers, to judges, you know, that sort of thing. And I guess what really kicked it off is I started reading a lot. When I went there it was never any shock of privation, because my whole neighborhood was there, so it was like going home. I knew the names of guards and legal procedures long before I ever went to jail, you know?

Where was this? Where was the first place you went?

The first place I went was Annandale. That was in 1954. Came out in '55. But I started reading, and writing, I like to play with words. I like to read them aloud and see how they sound. See how they make other people sound.

Years later while in prison, after extensive reading, I ran across the book that got me started really thinking about writing was a book called *Sex Life of a Cop*. I think the guy's name was Orrie Hitt, which was probably just a pseudonym for somebody famous. It was published out of a place in Fresno, California, by a guy named Sanford Aday. Now I had

become a voracious reader. I didn't work. They didn't put me in the job I wanted. They wouldn't put me in the band—that's where I wanted to be, because I wanted to learn how to play the drums. So I didn't work, and I got into a little trouble down there, trying to start a demonstration. So they put me in the hole for a little while, put me into this section over there where guys were doing a long time. At this time, I had this sentence of nine-to-thirteen years.

I started reading a lot of Mailer's stuff. Guys would give me books that they didn't want, which they thought were too heavy, and I would struggle through it. Carried the dictionary in one hand, the book in the next hand. One of the greatest things I ever did was to stop reading in context and read for definitions. If there was a word that I didn't understand, I didn't try to rush right through it and try to put it into context. I stopped and looked it up. And, again, this all came about because there was nothing else to do. There was no hurry to read the shit anyway.

I started reading so much stuff, reading about writers and writing. I discovered that I could tell a better story than what I was reading. I remained a voracious reader. I would read almost all night, sleep in the morning, do my exercise in the afternoon, and come back and repeat that process for years.

One night I didn't have anything to read and a guy name Bob Williams, blond-headed kid with real, real long blond hair and a big bald spot in the middle, he was my library, so to speak. I knocked on his cell—this was about three o'clock in the morning, and after he cursed me out he gave me this *Writer's Market* book that has the publishers, and where you can get different things published, or how to become an agent, all that kind of stuff. That rip-off stuff they sell.

I saw in there where this guy, Sanford Aday from Fresno, was paying two thousand dollars against royalties. I said, "Damn. Two thousand dollars against royalties." I was doing nine-to-thirteen years and I didn't steal two hundred dollars. I said, "Let me get a typewriter and start writing me a book," because I knew I could write stuff as good as what I'd been reading.

And so I borrowed a typewriter from Jackie Brown, one of the characters in *Howard Street*, stole some paper from the print shop, and I proceeded to try to write me a novel, which was, at first, exactly what I was reading—garbage. When the book began, the couple was gettin' in bed, and when the book ended they was gettin' out of bed, and all in between was one long orgy, one long male-chauvanistic orgasm.

In the course of writing that book I started being critical. I mean, there

was nobody really to talk to. There was one guy named Paul Fitzsimmons who was an old Irish guy who thought he was the poet laureate, but he was nasty and nobody could get along with him but me. But that's because I tolerated him. He was an old man. If it came to a fight, he couldn't beat you. But he had such a nasty attitude that people stayed away from him. But he heard that I had been writing. He said, "You been writing?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, hey, I got some stuff I want you to look at." He had been takin' this course from Westport, Connecticut— that writers' colony up there. I think the head of it was Rod Serling. And he just passed the lessons on to me. He wasn't really interested in them and they gave them to him free, so he gave them to me. I started writing about various things. My second novel, *To Reach a Dream*, was the title of this first book that I wrote although I changed it around afterwards. It was a piece of garbage. But the thrill of doing it is what made it so exciting. I mean, I felt good. And so, I would write all night from the light shining between the bars. That's one reason why I never learned to type, except with three fingers, because I couldn't do it at night. I never took those writing courses. I would write it all down in longhand, type it in the daytime, and I'd pass it around to some of the guys. You know, they were crazy about it. Lousy judgment, but they were crazy about it anyway. Because some of their names were in it.

But in the course of doing all that, I got interested in writing and writers. I started reading, not just novels, I started reading history, because I like jazz and at that time Chris Borgen, the Channel Two news guy, had a jazz station thing. And the guy from Riverside [Orrin Keepnews], he had this real smooth voice. Guys like that started me thinking about jazz. About this time the whole black culture thing was coming in. Malcolm X was becoming popular; King. And so that threw me into J.A. Rogers and people like that, which took me into reading about the history of jazz and all that kind of stuff, and that helped me musically, because by this time they had put me in the band and I had learned to play the drums.

This was all at Annandale?

No, I'm talking about prison. I started really writing in prison. I'm skipping all the Annandale stuff because there I was just BuBi the tough guy, you know, the athlete. Not tough in the sense of picking on anybody, but tough in the sense that I'm with the boys, you know. But no, the serious writing, and the need—and it is a need—the need to write sort of sprung from all the reading I had done. Some people in there, mainly

some of the Muslims, were always into the book thing. You know, they said, "Read this, read that." And so I read everything. I read everything that I could think of. I read the Bible four times, cover to cover. Didn't understand a thing in it, but I read it.

How much did you read when you were younger, as a kid?

Very little, none, hardly any. The only subjects that I passed in school—and this is literally true—were spelling and gym. Everything else I wouldn't do. But that little inspiration in prison caused me to do a lot of things. I got my GED while I was in prison. Starting to write became sort of a catharsis in a way. I still got notes that I wrote while I was in there. A lot of them don't make sense. They're naive—politically naive, philosophically naive, but it was all part of my development.

There wasn't any classes that you could take except something like Human Relations and that kind of stuff, which I took, because it was an outside teacher and he encouraged thought. Wasn't really study, but it was the only thing that I could reach out for in that system that would make it possible for me to even consider doing what I wanted to do. Even after I had written that manuscript called *To Reach a Dream*, and some short stories, I still didn't feel like I was a writer. I still felt like I was just passing time.

What was the time-frame of all of this?

This was between 1960 and '66, the first time I was in prison. I had written *Howard Street*, I had written that first manuscript I told you about, *To Reach a Dream*, and a whole bunch of doggerel poetry. Because, again, it was all undisciplined, it was all me. I finished *Howard Street* in 1963, and I didn't get out until 1966. That's when I started playing drums around the city.

You went to Annandale in '55?

Mm-hmm. When I was seventeen.

And you started writing letters for people, and reading, at that point?

Yes.

How long did you stay in Annandale?

About fifteen months. I came out, went to Caldwell. Caldwell was kind of home to a whole new experience, too, because there was a lot of junkies there who were pseudo-intellectuals. I mean, junkies were cool at that time. And they would have these weird thoughts, and they would take off—they would do these beatnik sort of things. They would get poetry from *Yugen* [a literary magazine published by LeRoi Jones and Hettie

Cohen], from Lawrence Ferlinghetti and people like that. If you look at *Howard Street*, the dedication on there is to "Wine" Carrington—Hal Carrington. He was the resident black beatnik. I mean, he didn't wear no shoes, he didn't wash, he wore his hair long, which was against the rules. They put him in the hole for it, but he wouldn't do it. He turned me onto Ferlinghetti and people like that. Baraka, when Baraka was LeRoi Jones. I still got some of them *Yugen* magazines.

I dedicated that to him [Carrington]. We were going to come out and we were really going to write. He was going to write poetry and I was going to write novels. And we were going to tear the Village up. This was all just talk to me, really. I mean, I wanted to do it, but I didn't know how to do it, and I had no way of knowing that I could do it. But he was an initial inspiration as far as organized writing was concerned.

What year would that have been?

That was in the '50s, from '56 to '58. That's twenty-five months I did up there.

What do you remember you guys talking about, in terms of your approach to literature?

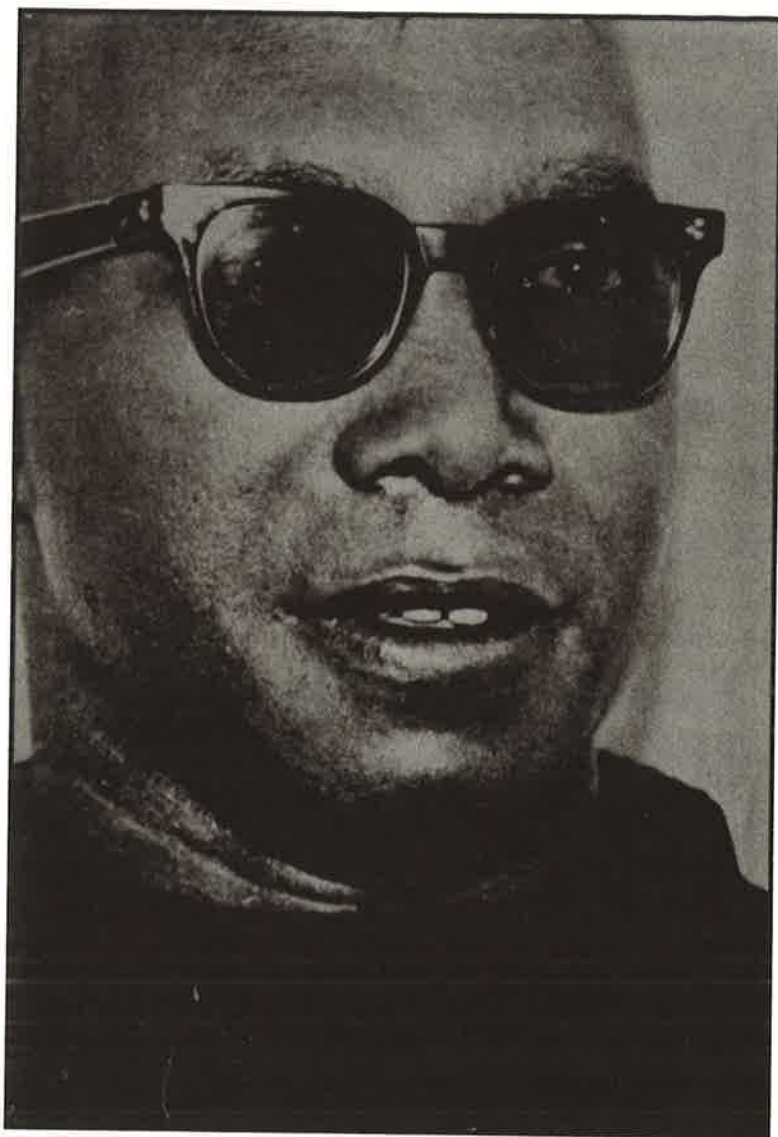
Well, I didn't. He was following Kerouac at the time. Stream-of-consciousness thinking. That's the way he wrote. You don't try to make sense of it, you leave that for the reader to do. And I followed that, but I mean, it wasn't as if I was a disciple or anything like that. It was like I was trying to follow his lead. I guess it was a sort of search pattern of mine.

But that faded when I got out of Caldwell, because I went back to selling drugs and trying to be a little jive-ass pimp. And it was pre-music, also. Before I got into music, except as a doo-wop singer. At that time Jimmy [Scott] was floating in and out of my life, between my jail times. I had this desire that I wanted to play with either him or Miles Davis. That's what I wanted to do.

As a drummer?

Yeah, as a drummer. As a matter of fact, I wound up being the bandleader down there after a while, in Trenton and Rahway. But anyway, I got out in 1966. *Howard Street* had laid in my closet for about three years, because I didn't know what I had. I had nobody to judge it. It's a strange thing when you have a talent and it's not developed and you come out. I went back to the same neighborhood and ideas that brought me to prison in the first place.

So I hadn't been tested in any way. I went back to doing the easiest thing. It never dawned on me, after all that writing, all that reading, it



THE LIFE AND ART OF NATHAN C. HEARD

never intellectually dawned on me that I could make a living at this, or that people would want to read this. By this time Claude Brown had written *Manchild in the Promised Land*. I don't know if Piri Thomas' book was out at that time. I knew James Baldwin's was out, and writers of that ilk. But it never dawned on me that I could do that, because—and this is strange—nobody ever told me that I could, you know?

My mother is the one who chose *Howard Street*. I got locked up again for trying another stick up while I was giggin' at the Cotton Club in Carteret on weekends, playing the drums. I did a friend a favor—loaned him a pistol. He didn't have a way to get there, so I drove him. And he got busted. That's how I wound up getting busted. Anyway, the lawyer came to see my mother. She got me a lawyer and she says, "I don't understand why he does this. He sings. He plays the drums. He even writes. Read this," and she threw *Howard Street* at him. And the guy came to see me, Joel Steinberg, he came to see me about that. I said, "Man, I don't want to see you here about no damn book. Get me out on bail before my parole officer finds out and I can't get out for bail." This was 1967.

He said, "Well, you know. Just take it easy. I've sent this manuscript to an agent, Paul Reynolds agency, and they think you got some talent here. They're about to make you an offer." And from that little conversation there, I became Nathan Heard the writer. Dial Press paid a nice little twenty-five-thousand dollar advance for it.

The judge, Judge Ard, I think he's on Superior Court now, he said, "Young man, I had twenty-five years planned for you, because you obviously committed the crime. But I'm going to take a chance, because I've tried to write and I know the concentration, how hard it is, and I know that it takes a lot of effort. And if these people have this kind of faith in you, I'm going to let you go. I can't do anything about the gun charge, so I'm going to suspend that sentence and you'll have to go back for your parole violation. All I want you to do is send me a book." That's when I went back in '67. *Howard Street* came out in '68, a month before I did. It came out in November '68. I came out in December of '68.

When was Howard Street actually written?

About '61, '63. It was like stuff that I got right now. It's still laying there. Another manuscript of mine called *The Afros* has never been published, because I didn't think it was good enough. It has to do with a guy who was caught between the fact that his friends were joining the Muslims, when they were known as the Black Muslims, but he had fallen in love with a white woman, and that internal conflict was pulling him. And it

had to do with the riots long before there were riots. This was long before they had the riots in '67.

Those are the sort of things that, I guess, turned me into a writer. But it's no good unless you're prepared to accept all the intellectual and emotional responses that go along with it, which I wasn't prepared for. Even after *Howard Street* came out, I got tired of people asking me questions. I wasn't intellectually prepared for that. So I would give short answers. And the worst thing I would do was tell people the truth. You can't do that. You know, you got to do like Ralph Ellison said, "Yes 'em to death. Agree 'em 'til they fall in the face," you know. Because if somebody said, "Hey, man, I read your book and that ain't true about your cousin." Or, "You wrote—you said you did this." I said, "No, I didn't write no autobiography. I wrote a novel. It's like a story. I made it up." You couldn't tell people that. They would get huffy and I'd revert to being BuBi—smack 'em in their goddamn mouth, you know. Because they were bothering me. It was a helluva long time before I was able to handle that kind of thing.

So, anyway, when I got out of prison the book came out and without graduating high school or anything else, by the next September I was teaching at Fresno State College [laughs], which was a growth period, because I felt that I had learned from those students and the people I came in contact with. A hell of a lot more than I had learned in the previous years, about dealing with emotion, dealing with writing. In order to stay ahead of the students, I had to do a lot of reading. So that was a growth period that helped me adjust to becoming, not just BuBi Heard, but Nathan Heard, the writer. It gave me a tolerance for people. I learned a lot of stuff, all sorts of things.

What were the periods of your incarceration?

From '60 to '66 and from '67 to '68.

What'd you get busted for?

Sales of narcotics. I was standing on the corner trying to make some money.

This is in Newark?

Yeah. Mm-hmm. They made one of those big sweeps, and this Fed, well, I don't know if he was a Fed, a friend of mine said, "Hey, this guy may want to buy something." I was hanging on that corner, wasn't doing nothing. I ain't never used heroin or nothing like that.

Where was this?

Uh, Montgomery Street and Prince, where Black's Tavern used to be. That was our hangout, next to the O.K. Pool Parlor. I said, "Well, shit. These guys are making money. If I sell one of these things I get to keep two dollars and the guy keeps five dollars." So this guy came to me three times: "Hey, man, can you show me where to get something?" And I went and got it, brought it back to him three times, three different occasions. Charged me with sales. It was a sweep. They must have swept up about twenty, thirty guys. It was one of their publicized busts.

And you got sentenced to six years over that?

No, I got sentenced to two-to-three for that and five-to-seven for the armed robbery. Which wound up being nine-to-thirteen, because it was consecutive.

And the armed robbery was what?

A liquor store, two liquor stores. That was it. Two liquor stores.

Where did you do the six years?

In Trenton and Rahway. Three in Rahway and then three in Trenton. I got sent to Trenton, because we had started a demonstration down at Rahway for better education facilities, recreational things, and the news media tried to turn it into a riot. Sort of like what happened in the *House of Slammers*. Sort of the same thing that happened there. We just stopped everybody from going to the mess hall. "Don't go in the mess hall. Don't eat." And the administration did the classic thing. They took the leaders and spread us all around. The next thing I knew, I was down there in Ocean County Jail. They kept me down there for about two, three weeks and then brought me back to Trenton, where I did the rest of my time, between there and Leesburg.

Trenton was the worst place you've ever been in your life?

Yes. Really. I mean, it was built in the last century. I'd never been in nothing as gloomy as Trenton State Prison. Little doors, all brick, green brick and, bam! you're inside and you can't get out of there. Rahway has some highlights. Instead of being just iron and bars it had some tile. And Rahway has a little more freedom. In wintertime you could go upstairs in the gym, whereas in Trenton, if it rained and you didn't go in the yard, you just was in for the night, because there was no gym or anything there.

And, as a matter of fact, although I started writing in Rahway, I did my best writing in Trenton, in that isolated condition. When I went back there after starting that demonstration, in 1963. I was put in a back cell by myself, which meant that although there was forty-odd cells, I'm

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down there by forty, so that means I don't have to put up with this constant traffic, like if I were in five or one or something like that. Guys who are gregarious love to be in them front cells, you know, they want to talk—to anybody. Guys who are doing a lot of time, generally, like the back cells, because nobody can come to the back. You've only got one direction to look.

So I think that was good training for me to discipline myself to keep on doing what I was doing, because there was a lot of temptations in there to participate in other things other than writing. I kept my physique, with the softball team, and the basketball team. Kept up with that. But other than that, I sometimes wouldn't even go to the yard if I didn't have to play. I was into an exercise program too, eight miles a day, so I wouldn't get out of shape, but there was only two hours of the day when I would get a little rest, after lunch. Then I'd go and get a nap, eat dinner. After dinner, I started writing until ten o'clock when the lights go out, then I'd really start writing. Or sit up and read.

You were saying before that you left high school and went into the Air Force?

Yeah.

That was when you were how old?

Fifteen.

So that's '51?

1952. September of '52.

What was your engagement with the Air Force like?

Terrible. I was unruly. Couldn't take discipline. And the worst thing of all is that they sent me to Mobile, Alabama. I had never really faced any kind of prejudice, you know, living in Newark. I mean, I knew about it, but I never really faced any of it.

I became an Air Police, because I didn't know anything else. We had barracks and most of the guys in there were from the area, from the South. And they would use "Nigger" and all that kind of stuff, like we—black people—use it. But I didn't like whites saying it to me. So every time somebody said it, I'd smack 'em in the mouth. I was a hell-raiser. Me and this guy named Russell Edwards use to fight, oh, I guess, maybe once or twice a week, because he didn't like black people, and I told him, "Well, I don't like you either, you redneck motherfucker." The black guys that lived down there, Montgomery and all those places, they were scared to death. I never understood why. Finally, they gave me an undesirable discharge. They said, "What do you think of that?" And I said, "Well,

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shit. You just as undesirable as me. I don't care." But the discharge never mattered anyway. I still wasn't even seventeen.

What were your growing-up years like? How come you didn't connect with school?

Ahh, I guess, in a way, it was sort of like the pressure to succeed from my mother. I never wanted to tell her that I couldn't do something. Most of the things in school bored the shit out of me, but I would never tell her, which is why I quickly jumped into the Air Force. I only went in there to keep from having to tell her that I was being put back in school.

What were the schools like that you went to? What were the teachers like?

Well, you didn't graduate Morton Street School without being able to read and write. They were good schools. The teachers were mostly white. My two biggest influences was Ben Schwartz, he was the gym teacher, and a lady named Miss Farmer. She recently died. They were always telling me, "You can do this. You can do that." And, you know, they would pick me for the lead in the play. I was not disruptive, but I was sort of contumacious. I would get in little small trouble. Nothing like sassing the teacher, no stuff like that, no real problems. Never played hookie.

Where did you grow up?

Broome Street and Baldwin Street, where the JFK Center is. That building sits on where my house was, a four-story tenement. It was still sort of a mixed neighborhood. Prince Street looked like Mott Street, with all the fruit stands and all that kind of stuff out there. It was, to me, a beautiful place to grow up.

It was just you and mom in the house?

Me and my mother and my grandmother. That was it. And an occasional boyfriend, you know, of my mother's.

Your mother was a singer?

Yes, she was a blues singer. She used to work for Sam Goldberg. She worked with Slappy White and Nipsey Russell. Then she started doing M.C. work.

Was your mom from Newark?

Yes. She was born in Alabama, but she was raised here. I had another sort of influence that was kind of weird, too, in that my father, who was a college man, somehow wound up in prison for armed robbery, also. (I mean, him and his friend.) Did ten years. I only saw him twice the first ten years of my life, and both of those times were in prison.

He was a college man? Where had he gone to school?

I don't even know. I very seldom even spoke to him. My mother seldom talked about him. I don't know anything about her family, or my father's family, except that I knew some of them that were up here from the South that came to visit. You know Bernie Moore, he was the Mayor's aide? And his sister—they were the cousins I had. They lived on Wilsey Street, in a *house*, which automatically made them better than us. I never had much family connection, except with my mother and grandmother. My grandmother died when I was in prison.

I guess what I've always lacked is the motivation that will push me beyond the limits that I've encumbered myself with. It's hard for me to get motivated on certain things, especially in my own interests. And it's a sort of funny feeling, because I always feel like when I motivate myself, I'm bragging. I don't know where that came from, but I always feel like I'm bragging if I start doing things on my own. I don't want to seem pushy, I don't want to get in anybody's way. You know, that sort of thing.

Or to assume that there's any importance to what you're going to be doing.

Yeah. Uh-huh. Because Philly Joe Jones told me, before he left prison, he said, "Man, you could be a damn good drummer." He had me splitting—you know, playing three-quarter time with this hand, four-quarter time with the other.

This was in Trenton?

Yes, in Trenton, before he left. I got there a couple of days before he left, I think.

Between sentences, my maximum time being out was eleven months. I could not make twelve months. From Annandale to Caldwell was eleven months. From Caldwell to prison was eleven months. From prison back to prison was eleven months.

How do you remember Howard Street germinating in your mind?

I remember it as just a place where I went. Because Howard Street was just the name of that one street. It was not the neighborhood. You know, people keep talking about Howard Street. Howard Street was nothing. My area was the Third Ward. It was Broome Street, Baldwin Street, Court Street, Jake Green's Horse and Wagon. That's what I really remember. *Howard Street* was something that I wrote. I mean, the first chapter of *Howard Street*, where the girl takes off the trick, was just a short story. And I just kept adding on to it after that, not really thinking I was writing a novel. But I just kept going on with it, and it turned into *Howard*

Street, that place.

But, again, I did this in sort of a semi-ignorance, man. It was a story I knew. I'd been hanging out on the street and Howard Street was the natural thing to call it. But it really had nothing to do with Howard Street.

When you started out writing, you were using what you had seen in real life as the basis—

That's all. That's all.

To take off on?

Yeah. I mean, the real Gypsy Pearl was ugly and had a scar across her face and was a junkie. But I made her beautiful in the book, and gave her Marpessa Dawn's face. Remember *Black Orpheus*? Well, that's the face I described in *Howard Street* as being Gypsy Pearl. But it was really Marpessa Dawn, because I had seen *Black Orpheus* and fell in love.

Those things that work in your head unconsciously, like how to stimulate people's desire, worked then, because I don't know why I made her beautiful rather than describe the real Gypsy Pearl. I don't really know why, except that I guess I knew, by osmosis, that that's what people would remember. I mean, who wants to disappoint a damsel in distress, especially if she's fine? Those were, like, unconscious things. I mean, those are left over from the movies I've seen and some of the books I've seen. The heroine is always beautiful, and the straight guy in the book is noble—the working guy.

At that point, when you started writing what became Howard Street, were there writers who made a big impression on you?

Oh, the guys I named: Baldwin, Richard Wright, Mailer. I couldn't read Joyce, but I had the books. I couldn't read them. I didn't know what the hell he was writing about. I just wanted to read. But there were guys that I studied, in the sense that I wanted to write like them, and chief among those people was Mailer, at the time. But then I started reading Richard Wright.

He impressed you?

It's the only book I ever read that made me cry.

Which book of his?

Native Son. *Native Son*. And what made me cry was the realization of Bigger Thomas, at the end of the book, when this guy, the lawyer—was his name Solomon?—comes to see him, and Bigger's in the cell, and the lawyer's getting ready to leave and Bigger says to the lawyer, "Tell Mr. —" then he stopped. He caught himself and said, "Tell Jan I said hello."

He had become a man in that one sentence, man. Because all before that, when he was riding him around, the girl and the guy, he called him "Mr. Jan." When he was sitting in the death cell, getting ready to die, that's when he finally realized. He said, "Tell Mr.—" and then he stopped. He said, "Tell Jan I said hello," or goodbye, whatever it was.

It was so amazing to me that this guy could grow and yet at the moment of his growth, he's going to die.

I put that book down about three or four o'clock in the morning and I just let the emotion—it wasn't like a tearjerking cry. I just let the emotion take me, you know. And it was the first time I ever cried over a book. First and last.

From then on, to me, he became *the* writer. Until here comes Ralph Ellison. I read him. He became the writer. And then John Williams wrote *The Man Who Cried I Am*. He became the writer. So it became a process of admiring what people did, rather than admiring what they are.

Every writer that I enjoyed, man, I said, "Damn, I wish I could do that." And that always pushed me. That always pushed me. That fact that, "Well, I could do that. I could do that." I could make that emotion strong, too. I could make people feel what I just felt. But the real process was in allowing myself to feel. That's the hardest part. I mean, I guess that's sort of like a man trying to become a feminist, you know, in his thoughts. It's a certain emotion—a floodgate—that you've got to let go. That don't mean that you boo-hoo. It means that you open yourself up to these emotions and feel them for the first time, without any disguise, without having to say to yourself, "I got to guard against this, because if I think this, or if I feel this, I must be a punk."

That's what *Native Son* did for me, in showing me how to enjoy a book, and how to enjoy somebody's—a transference of images from one person's mind to me. Because they're only words, you know. They're just symbols. But the thoughts that they engender are really, really magnificent. I guess that's what started me thinking that I could write—that I could write and make people feel this, too. I've achieved it at a certain point, but I don't think I've done it to the degree that I want to. And, for me, over the past few years, as I've seen the reading levels deteriorate, I see people's interest jump into the New Jack City, instead of real issues. Again, that discouragement shifts into gear inside me somehow, and I say, "Fuck it," I'm just going to write what I want to write, when I want to write. I'm not up against the wall about paying the bills and stuff. I'm getting along okay. Ain't nobody making no money anyway. I need that motivation that I've sort of lost, again. In going around to various col-

lege, it comes back every once in a while. Which is why I've started to write an autobiography, to see if I can explore myself *for myself*—not for anyone else.

Is this an idea that you had back then, that writing was some kind of self-discovery?

I knew that. I knew that without knowing it. I intuited it before I really knew it, before I thought about it. The first thing about it was that I remember being in prison and starting to write, and before I knew it, it was daylight, you know, and I wasn't tired. I wasn't tired. I knew it in that my friends changed. . . .

Consequently, the only guys in there who were able to do this were the guys who were trying to find themselves through some religious experience, like the Muslims. They became sort of like the jailhouse intellectuals. They had the books. They would give you books, not that they understood them, but they had found something, you know. It was that intangible thing called, I guess, "spirit."

After *Howard Street* came out, me and Rubin Carter got tight. Whereas we used to be sort of just passing each other before when we were in jail, we sort of got together and became partners and started talking.

This was what years?

This was the last time I came out, '67, '68, when we both went back. He went back for those murders and I was going back for the armed robbery, or the parole violation. Before he came out and made the name in boxing, we had kind of been tight, but then he was a hoodlum and I was a basketball player, baseball player. But he had changed. . . . That's what changed me more than anything else, just different conversation.

How do you think your ideas about literature evolved? Did you think that you were trying to say something with your writing, aside from just telling a story?

Not in *Howard Street*. No. I just had a story to tell. I was trying in subsequent books, especially in the *House of Slammers*. I was trying to say, well, a guy goes up against a system, and even though he remains pure, he also fails because the forces that surround him are what kills him.

In the context of my characters, very few of them survive. They might survive economically, but I'm looking beyond that. If there's a moral in my writing, that I see, it's just the moral to overcome one's own desperation, one's own self-doubt. "Am I really good enough for this world? Is this the world I really made? Or, is this the world I want?" And, of course, those are questions that won't be answered—never can be answered.

So, consequently, most of my characters fail, except Gypsy Pearl in

Howard Street. She didn't fail. She didn't go with the working guy for the good life. She didn't go with the junkie, because he was going to jail. She went back to being a whore. She walked into the bar. You know, she took her fate in her own hands. That was an accident. I didn't realize that. It's just what happens. I saw them girls up there all the time doing this sort of thing.

There's a moral in *Cold Fire Burning*. That was a moral story, because this guy had wanted to defy his friends and society by being in love with this girl, but he couldn't function because the guilt he felt, the societal guilt he felt, kept interfering with his relationship, which is why he could never climax, you know, with her. And why, at the end, when he's running away after he helped this guy escape from the cops, he asks this guy, "What's your name?" and stops it there, because that's a process of identification: "Who are you?" By asking who is he, I'm asking, "Who is me?" But in the meantime, we're both running. We're both running from the man, which is, again, running from our society. So that may bring our bond closer together, but it doesn't solve the initial problem, which is, who am I and what am I going to do about it?

But those are developments that make the writing harder, because it's not as easy as it was with those first novels, where I was just willing to tell a story and that was that. Now I want to leave something for a person, a thought. And it's hard. It's hard to put those thoughts into a simplistic sort of language. I guess that's the challenge.

Did you see that Mailer interview with David Frost? He was talking about God being—

Oh, yeah. I saw part of it. I didn't like that. I turned it off at that point. Because that wasn't the Mailer that I knew. That wasn't the Mailer that stabbed his old lady. That wasn't the Mailer that would argue with Baldwin and Buckley. That's the Mailer that's gotten old and satisfied and thinking about his future. I want that immortal Mailer that said, "Fuck you." That's the Mailer that I was interested in.

During that period, the late fifties, when you're starting to write, what kind of influence was the civil rights movement?

Well, very simplistic, like most everybody else's, like almost any street kid. I ain't gonna let nobody hit me. I believe in Malcolm X. You know, I ain't gonna let anybody kick my ass. That kind of thing. Belligerence. What influenced us, I think, the majority of the guys that I knew, was the Malcolm X tradition, because not only was that Malcolm X, that was John Wayne. "I'm not gonna take this."

So dealing with the Gandhi-esque thing really was beyond our pale. And behind Malcolm came Stokely Carmichael and Baraka, and Rap Brown and Karenga and the Panthers, you know all that reinforced the tough-guy image. That was the American in us.

I think it's true that the black political tough guy became romanticized in a way that was kind of similar to Hollywood, that gangster idea.

Yeah. As a matter of fact, it was kind of silly at times. I mean, it was a great symbolic statement to carry those guns into the Statehouse in California, but it didn't mean shit, you know.

Some of the old Panthers, they got together last year and put out a newspaper and they had a centerfold filled with all these people that had been killed. It was like fifty faces on there or something. It seems like it was kind of suicidal. I mean, as far as tactics go. They tried to say, "Well, we were the vanguard of the revolution" and all that.

Well, they've got to say that. They've got hindsight with them. They're going to say that now.

But these people, like Ellison, Baldwin and Richard Wright, in a way they're very much a part of the whole civil rights movement, their writing.

Yeah, because they taught us that the anger has to be managed, also. It has to be managed. And you can't get mad at every situation because it's not going to solve every situation. And even the situation that you can solve won't get solved. It may get solved in the next generation. It's that ongoing thread called life.

I surely hope that we will one day become the people that we've always told ourselves we were, but I don't have any notion that we're going to do it just simply because we believe it, or because it's faith, or that they're good. I think it's going to be because it's in our own best interest that somehow we need to do it.

What do you think about the world that you grew up in—the world that Howard Street was about?

Oh, that world has deteriorated. We see that now in these kids who are killing each other for things, for chains and shoes, sneakers. As the drugs became more potent, they became more virulent and more self-destructive, and that whole generation that was supposed to raise these kids abandoned them. What happened to all those guys in the sixties who were supposed to get those skills and bring it back to the community and build it up? They wound up becoming what they were against. A black foot in your ass hurts just as much as a white one. Despite all these congressmen and mayors and city councilmen and shit that we have, they're

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simply, in the final analysis, users—politicians—people who have this need to say, "I have the way."

They're calling Newark Renaissance City now, but where are all those people going, all the people in those twelve-story-high buildings, where are they going? They can't move into those townhouses. What's happening to them?

Well, the thing is, now, if you ride around Newark, once you get outside of downtown, it's a pretty menacing environment.

Yeah. Yeah. And I don't see that anyone has any solutions, because most of the people who are supposed to be leaders are split themselves. And not split because of any spirituality, but split over economic forces. Okay. And as the job market gets worse, and the educational requirements get higher, we find ourselves with less and less.

It requires, at some point, contradicting the Broad Street interests, or whatever you call it.

Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's a particular thorn in our side, because these people have set themselves up a—you know, that word I'm beginning to hate—our "role models."

Yeah. I hate that.

I'm beginning to hate that phrase.

How did you fit into the movement in the sixties?

I didn't. I was locked up for most of it, and then when I got out, I was immediately sent out to California, to teach out there. Shoot, I became a flower child. I stayed out there for close to eighteen months. I married a girl from out in Fresno and brought her back here. I mean, I wasn't ready to be no damn husband, you know. Bought a house, put her in it and proceeded to start hanging out in the after-hours spots. It was totally, totally mindless. I got married for the wrong reason.

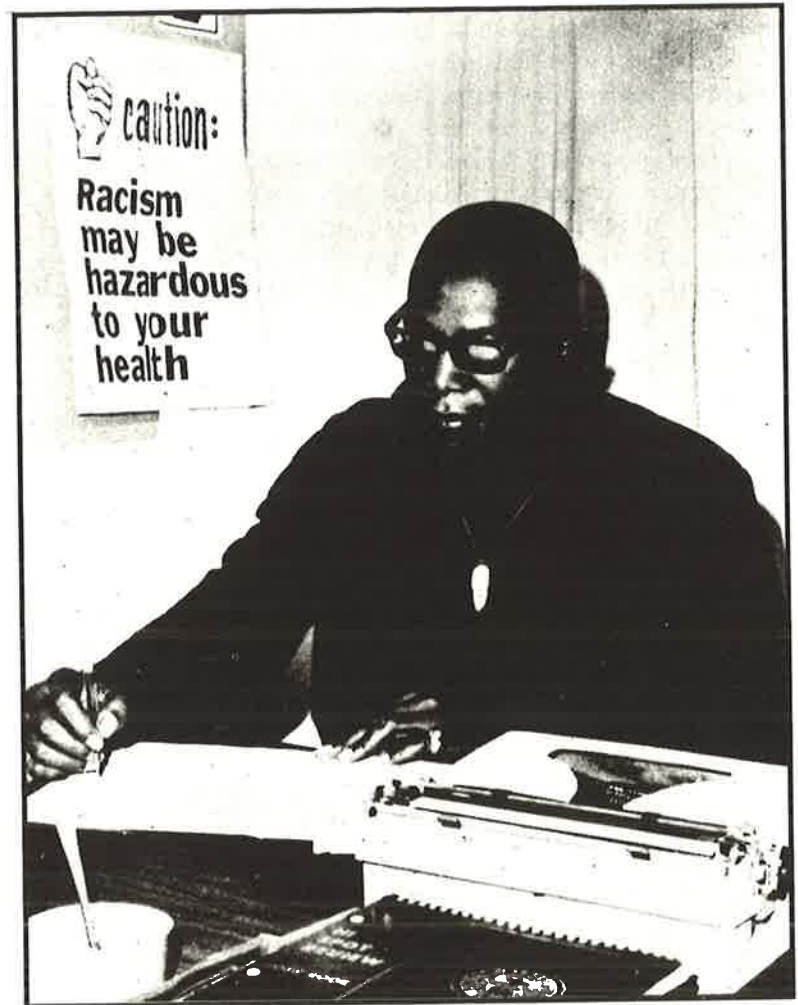
When you say you went out there and became a hippie —

Well, I meant that I got seduced by that whole California syndrome. Laid back, laid back. Nothing bothered me. . . . That year I won the Most Distinguished Teacher award at Fresno State College, 1969-70, so that's what it was like.

How do you look at the whole thing of coming out of, pretty much, a totally black world —

Mm-hmm—

And suddenly —



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It didn't bother me, because, again, after spending all those years in jail, I'd been conditioned to be around white people all my life. That's it, you know. I'd been conditioned. I mean, half the guys in jail were white. At that time the jails weren't so totally, overwhelmingly black. So that was no problem.

As a kid growing up, my first aunts that I knew about were two Jewish and Italian women who were my mother's best friends, and for the first couple years of my life I thought they were my relatives, you know. And being in California, they were so totally accepting—except the radicals, I mean in the religious context—the Black Muslims. . . .

I handled it all very well, because I didn't come in with very many preconceived notions. I took two months just going out there, almost. Just driving from Newark to there. Stopped everywhere, in every major city. Started from Pittsburgh on, taking that middle route: Pittsburgh, Chicago, went through Wyoming, I stayed in Nebraska a few days, Reno a few days, Denver. In Colorado, coming over the Rockies, it was really raining and I saw this hippie couple, he with his guitar and she was pregnant. I stopped and picked them up in Denver and drove them all the way to San Francisco, where I hooked up with Ernie Gaines.

It was really a long, overwhelming experience to me. I got a short story about that, it's about twenty-five pages long, called "Going West," about a guy taking a trip out there.

Most of the people I started really associating with after a while were people like the Bluesteins. He was from New York, but he had been out there for fifteen years, him and Phil Levine, the poet. As far as the college crowd, they were who I hung out with who were part of the college. Most of the other people were students, and they were mostly black. But the people who sort of guided me were the Bluesteins and the Levines. As a matter of fact, I've still got their pictures here. I'm carrying it ever since. [Pulls out his wallet.] I'll never forget them people. These are the Bluestein kids. Jeremy, the oldest one, turned out to be a scientist.

It seems that you didn't have a mercenary idea about your writing. Otherwise, just the idea of getting over and making some money might have been a motivating factor.

Well, I've never been like that. I passed up some beautiful chances to do a lot of things, because I just didn't do it. I mean, it wasn't life or death to me. The writing was immediate. It was full of concern.

This whole idea of art—did you have the idea that this was a serious thing?

THE LIFE AND ART OF NATHAN C. HEARD

No. Can't you tell by my writing? I'm a naturalistic writer. There's no artifice there. It's straight from the shoulder. Well, art in the sense that it's subterfuge and analogy for something else, of course. Art in that sense—art in the sense that it's life. But not art in the sense that I give the life solutions, or resolutions. I just tell them what it is. That's all. A poet comes forward and tells them in another way and gives them a resolution that I would never think of, because I would be tending to tell them the basic square-on. Going another route might be better for them, and an artist would do that. They would give them more alternatives than I do, as a naturalistic writer. . . . I'm a guy who was always looking for easy answers to most things, which also deals with naturalism, because that makes me more, in that sense, realistic, which is why I question everything and question nothing. I couldn't draw you a solution as to how to deal with some problem, because I don't have that sort of a bent.

So, everything I read was real to me, in that I felt the impact, which turns into my reality, which I then acted upon, the way some kids are reacting to these movies, or the way I acted toward John Wayne and Alan Ladd, or to a Johnny Weismuller for that matter, who was always kicking them Africans' asses.

What's that—"The woods are dreamy, dark and deep / But I have appointments to keep / And miles to go before I sleep"? I think that's Yeats [actually, Robert Frost]. But do you see what he's saying? He's got a lot of shit to do before he dies. I wouldn't go that route. That's poetic. That's the art. That's the real art. I'm an artist, but I'm bound, like all artists, by the limits of my imagination.

But those are limits that you choose to work within.

I must choose them because that's what I'm doing, working within them. But who's to say I couldn't appreciate better? That touch is what I needed to proceed, I think, to become the kind of artist that Robert Frost may have been. Or to have the imagination of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, because of all the underlying trappings of a culture that lays over it. And that man, in his phrase, is as powerful to me as any phrase I've ever read in the Bible, because I read this phrase in his book where, as I told you, the young man's grandfather told him, "Whenever you face these people, Yes 'em to death. Agree 'em 'til they die." It takes a certain training to deal with that, because that ain't the way a young man wants to face anything.

"Fuck you." I mean, that's why we believed in Malcolm X instead of Martin Luther King, because our nuts were hanging out and we wanted

to show them.

It's weird. I listened to a speech by Stokely Carmichael [Kwame Toure] last night. I mean, he was still stuck in that whole kind of approach.

He has to be, but guess what—you know, just like him and Angela and everybody else now. Now they have to justify the failure of socialism as defined by the Russians. They have to define a lot of things. I mean, everything they ever believed in is fucked up. Like Malcolm said about the Muslims, "Niggers fucked up." Those were Malcolm's words. I got a Malcolm X poem that I don't show anybody either. I've been meaning to send it to some magazine every birthday. I've been meaning to do it, but I never done it. I don't know why. Do you?

Well, I don't know.

Well, I'll take the artistic answer, as opposed to the straight on.

Well, I think a part of it is an emotional thing. You know, I think I'm similar in a lot of ways, in the sense that—

Yeah, but you always got something going for you. You're always working at something.

Well, yeah, but so are you. I mean, I go through periods where I can't figure out why or how I should apply myself. Or, you know, the whole idea of—well, what makes what you're going to write so important that it should become an all-consuming—

Yeah. Well, see, that's one of the things that's helping me get over, because I no longer assume that it has to have an importance. It's the desire to do it that makes me want to do it. It ain't getting the nut, it's the chase. I already know what the nut feels like. I've had that thrill of finishing a book before, and having it succeed. So why have I put myself through this agony, which is really a sort of paradise? Because it feels good. It's life. It makes me feel alive when I do it. That's why. I nearly kill myself when I start writing, because I go too long. Can't sleep.

Going through that—what do you think it is about that that makes it so enjoyable?

The idea of creating ideas on paper that I know will affect people in their minds, and they'll see—regardless of what I scratch on that paper—they'll see the vision that I had in my head, and they'll feel what I felt. And that's like being God in a sense. That's like being in control. And for somebody with my background, being in control is very tempting, because you desire it. Because you always felt that you never had it before in anything. So you kind of crave it even when you don't.

What do you mean, "somebody with my background"?

Black, deprived, all that sort of stuff. Race—you know, institutional racism, all the things that I can generally blame for individual failures, which is what we all do. Every politician who gets busted—"Race." No it wasn't, motherfucker. You just fucked up.

Does that pleasure in writing go beyond megalomania?

No. Sure. It's just the pleasure of drawing a life from something where there was nothing. It's having an idea and making it play out—into characters that you want to create. And when it plays the other way, and it comes naturally, you feel like you're not even doing it. You feel like you just have to do it.

It makes—you know, you'll put down a thought which will trigger another thought in your head, which will make you put down your pen and forget the first thought, because it triggered this thought. That's always good. Any expansion is good, even if it interrupts this for a moment, because perhaps you'll go back to it, but in the meantime you're expanding with each—

What is it, beyond technique?

That's not technique, that's emotion. I'm feeling all this. I'm not doing all this, I'm feeling it. Sometimes the writing ain't shit, but I'm feeling it.

We think of great writers as though there's something that they're trying to say behind what they actually write.

Great writers always do. But the point is, is that what they really mean? Sometimes it isn't. Again, the effort and the joy is in the doing. It's the conquering of one's own spirit. It's in the doing that you feel good. . . . That's totally libidinous. You know, to me, that's crunching the whole essence of your humanity into this one act, as powerful as any spermatozoa ever went through a vagina.

Do you think that the kind of writing that you do is up to the greater dictates of the human imagination, or that it's great art?

Oh, no. I don't think that at all about myself. I'm a good writer as opposed to a great writer. I can make people believe my lies. That's a good writer. I can make you think what I want you to think for the moment. I may not offer you any way, or any other alternatives. I may not make you explore, so that whatever you get from mine you can then extrapolate out into your life, and to your world at large. I mean, I didn't inspire you to do anything but say, "Hey, there but for the grace of God." Or, "Hey, I understand that."

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Because, being as limited as we are, we know each other's pain, even though we can't personally feel it. You know what pain feels like, right? But you can't tell me how much this hurts me. But there are great writers who can almost make you feel that same thing, essentially, or at least open other avenues that can do that for you, to make you explore. I don't explore people's souls. I don't explore what makes them tick. I might deal with the actions that make them tick, but the underlying things are not really my realm. And great writers do that, top and bottom. They give you the underbelly and a path, and acknowledge to you that, "Hey, it may be wrong."

When I came back from California I got a three-year position at Rutgers and I started losing it. I left—this is one of the stupid things I did, I left without getting tenure. . . . I think that's when I discovered coke, and my interest strayed to after-hours spots and the fast girls.

This is in the early seventies?

Seventy, seventy-two, seventy-three. Most of my friends were hanging in New York at the time. But Newark was my world. It was the only one I had ever known before going out to California. I proceeded to discover all the friends that I had left behind—the guys that I had grown up with and hung out with. I started hanging out with them again, forgetting about my wife, who was very lonely here. I had bought a house in East Orange. I started missing classes. I'd find an excuse not to go.

In '76 I was sentenced to nine months because I had a pistol. Cops had broken into my apartment by mistake looking for somebody with some drugs, and when my door came crashing open, I grabbed the pistol. And he said, "It's the police." I said, "Well, what the hell you want in here?" So this guy said, "We got the wrong apartment." But then they started searching the apartment, because they said, "Well, that's Nathan Heard." They knew I had a record and I had a gun in my hand, which was totally illegal. I got a felony record, I can't have a gun. Any time I get caught with one, it's time.

But anyway, this judge, Marilyn Loftus, started giving me a lecture about, you know, having a pistol with my record, and I was trying to tell her, "Listen, lady. I have a gun now for the same purpose as you might have one, because I'm afraid of these streets, too. I'm beyond being a criminal. I don't have a gun—" you know, there was a time if you caught me with a gun, when I was younger, that you could have said, "Yes. He had it for a bad purpose." But I was in my home, and my door came crashing in. They could have knocked on the door and I would have



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opened it. So I said, "Don't lecture me about my record. You've seen my record, you know that." So she told me, she said, "I think you're showing contempt for this court." And I said, "I am." She said, "Well, I have something for you. Here's nine months in Caldwell. When you write me a letter of apology, I may consider letting you come back out. I may rescind the sentence and let you out." I said, "Well, lady, I might write about you, but I ain't never gonna write to you." About an hour later, man, I said, "Shit. Maybe I should write this letter." [Laughs] That brought back all kind of bad memories. But I went on and did time.

Did you write the letter?

No, I never wrote it. I wound up doing six months.

* * * * *

On my table right now I've got at least two-hundred pages of manuscript of the novel that I've been working on for three years now, but I don't feel any urgency to finish it, mainly because the world that I'm trying to deal with now has changed so much. The things that I wrote about, the kids growing up in my era, are pabulum compared to what these kids are doing now, and I'm trying to capture them, without being dishonest in any way. I'm trying to capture them and have this character—who is sort of loosely based on me—come back to Newark and see that there's something that needs to be done. He don't know what, but he sees something needs to be done, and he proceeds to confront the issues. . . .

Essays

Newark and the Rhetoric of Optimism

At last, it is probably fair to say that the dire predictions of Newark's imminent death, so widely and confidently articulated after the riots of July 1967, were premature. In the years since the late 1960s, Newark lost over twenty-seven percent of its population, from 390,000 residents in 1967 to 275,221 by 1990. The riots dramatized the near collapse of one of America's most horrific racial powder kegs. In their aftermath the city headed most lists as the nation's most imperiled urban area. But as the historian Francis Fox Piven reminded us in 1977 at a conference observing the tenth anniversary of the cataclysmic summer of 1967 in Newark, cities don't die, they change. This is true, at least as far as Newark is concerned. The city has not only survived the more than two decades of precipitous decline that followed the riots, it has skillfully marketed its image of infamous plight as the cause celebre of a highly publicized vision of revitalization and the reconstruction of both its public image and environs. Johnny Carson's frequent jibes at Newark's infamous national image all but stopped, even before he retired from the "Tonight Show." Mayor Sharpe James is seen as one of the most popular and energetic elected officials in New Jersey in large part because of his ability to invoke positive images of a phoenix rising out of a generation of ashes left from the riots. And to the dismay of many urban cynics and Newark bashers, the city was recently cited as one of America's most livable cities by the United States Conference of Mayors, having earlier received an All-American Cities Award from the National Civic League! Against the background of a shrewd public relations campaign that has virtually reinvented Newark as a metaphor for urban revitalization, there are now at least three distinct images of contemporary Newark, which, depending on one's vantage point, speak volumes on what modern life,

race, suburbanization, governmental policy and local politics have done to the urban landscape and experience.

The first, and most conspicuous, of these images is that of a city frayed by time, weakened by reckless and often inane public policy, battered by both modern racial antipathies and the desperate consequences of industrial decline. It is an image of a city as refuge for Afro-American and Latino victims who spend much of their lives sifting through what is left of the Welfare State. In less-than-humble public housing projects, tenements and decayed streets, these victims seem at times almost listless, their communities hardly in keeping with the traditional image of dark ghettos as places of spirited human activity. They are those whom the eminent sociologist William Julius Wilson calls the truly disadvantaged.

Existing very close to this image of social desperation, unkempt living spaces, lurking danger and victimization is another image of vibrant neighborhoods where hardworking and often remarkably successful white ethnic, black and brown families are well ensconced in the city's northern and southern ends, in the western tip of Vailsburg, in the Ironbound district, the well-kept dwellings managed by New Community Corporation and the recently developed, protected residential and educational complex known as University Heights. Indeed, those who know little of Newark's dense complexity as an urban community are often surprised to learn that such orderly enclaves, with well-manicured lawns, gleaming late model cars and blessed quiet, could exist within the boundaries of such a notorious city.

More recently, Newark residents, and those who scrutinize the city for clues on the potential rebirth of old and predominantly poor industrial cities in the United States, have witnessed the rebirth of a third image: a bustling downtown, now heavily dotted with sparkling new high-rise office buildings, a network of thriving colleges and universities, and a site along the Passaic River that is slated for a performing-arts venue that its boosters claim will one day rival New York's Lincoln Center. During business hours, this vibrant section of the city is often crowded with vehicular traffic and people, a mosaic of racial stocks and cultures on the major streets, in the stores and the leading cultural and financial institutions. It is an image which has long been an affirmation of a healthy city—people, the more the better, in seemingly perpetual motion, interacting with one another amid the edifices symbolic of the triumph of capital over all other pursuits.

Inasmuch as these three images represent a virtual montage of a city

which from 1967 to the late 1980s was largely seen as a one-dimensional tragedy, one might say that Newark has come a long way in projecting a more complicated or varied image of itself. Yet the current emphasis on the vibrancy of the downtown section, voiced through the public-private partnership of Renaissance Newark and an ingeniously composed chorus of optimistic discourse by its elected officials, has led inevitably to nagging concerns about how much the revitalization of the city truly benefits the truly disadvantaged and the middle class. Or, put another way, which of Newark's three images best reflects where the city is likely heading?

The powerful quality of these images suggest that they are of recent vintage. In fact, they have a much longer history in modern Newark. A thriving downtown district has been a part of the city's, and urban America's, most enduring images since the late nineteenth century. Newark's downtown became both a concrete symbol of the triumph of consumer culture and the city's commercial vitality and supremacy over the suburbs. People throughout New Jersey were drawn to Newark's great department stores and shops along Broad and Halsey Streets, to the city's ornate movie theaters, its magisterial museum and library and its fancy restaurants. Indeed, downtown Newark was important to the cultivation of popular tastes in fashion, entertainment and the arts in the Garden State. For white Protestants and the recently arrived white ethnic and black settlers, whose old customs were ultimately overshadowed by middle-class conceits and comforts, Newark's downtown was a window onto the future.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the general health of Newark was often measured by the vitality of its downtown. The rise of Broad Street as Newark's most powerful image during the first half of this century involved an extraordinary merging of private greed and public ideals. It brought onto the stage of local politics and civic affairs Newark's leading industrialists, bankers, insurance magnets, arts devotees and urban reformers. They became Newark boosters who, in trumpeting the city's strengths so well, created the impression that life was good here.

The assumption that downtown Newark was the measure of the city, however, was increasingly disputed by the coincidence of the steadily declining image of its neighborhoods, especially those located near the center of town. The downtown boom did not necessarily have a beneficent impact on those old districts that first settled European immigrants and later black migrants from the South. Nor did it stave off, as was

hoped, the gathering sense that Newark would never become a truly great American city. Private housing construction during the first half of the twentieth century was nearly non-existent for working-class and poor families. Moreover, the rise of large downtown retail stores placed smaller retail operations in the ethnic neighborhoods at a decided disadvantage as more wage earners, seduced by consumer culture, measured their success in part by their patronage of large retail stores. Although it is likely that a booming downtown created a transcendent feeling of local pride, Newark was actually heading toward a future in which the integrity of its older neighborhoods would be routed and ultimately sacrificed by an overindulgence in the symbolic importance of downtown.

In retrospect, the trade off was hardly worth it. The awful living conditions which existed in areas just beyond the shadows of downtown skyscrapers were to spread like a cancer to once vital communities, including those that surround the southern end of Bergen and High Streets and Clinton, South Orange, Clifton and Mt. Prospect Avenues. The integrity of those areas, as many older Newarkers remember, was for many years vigilantly guarded by their residents, mostly white ethnic and black families, who had a strong attachment to their neighborhoods. They worked hard, protected their kids from the temptations of the streets and paid their taxes. They loved Newark in a way that has been virtually impossible for all but the most zealous since the mid-twentieth century.

But the quality of life in the neighborhoods of those who loved modern Newark soured as indeed it had to because of the sinister practice of redlining ethnically mixed neighborhoods, of which Newark had plenty during most of the twentieth century. Local residents found it nearly impossible to acquire mortgages or loans to fix up their dwellings. They were in many ways made into marginal residents who were unable to stop their city from becoming one of the nation's most prominent victims of urban renewal. They were powerless to prevent their city from erecting more public housing units per capita than any American municipality, hence turning itself into a virtual warehouse for America's poorest citizens.

All the more, the sad fate of these once vital neighborhoods was sealed as suburban living became a reality for more white families after World War II. Indeed, among the many reasons why the image of a healthy downtown became an imprecise barometer of Newark's general health, none were more important than the ascendancy of suburban living and the creation within suburbs of highly competitive recreational, retail and, more recently, cultural venues that drew middle-class fami-

lies out of the city and became a formidable challenge to the supremacy of old downtown Newark. As late as the 1950s, there was still nothing quite like a Saturday shopping sojourn along Broad Street, or a family picnic in Weequahic or Branch Brook Parks, or searching through the vast book stacks at the Newark Public Library, or taking in an exhibition at the Newark Museum, or having a moment of spiritual repose in one of the city's grand churches. Those enticements and other joys unique to Newark remained, but fewer white suburbanites were willing to come here and endure the inconveniences, dangers and possibilities of a truly urban experience. Once the bellwether city for opportunity and excitement in modern New Jersey, Newark became over the generation that followed World War II a symbol of what was wrong in urban America.

As more of Newark's white residents left their old neighborhoods to incoming blacks and Latinos, the image of a vital downtown was routed by the stark image of decaying neighborhoods. Philip Roth, in his 1959 novel *Goodbye, Columbus*, described the transformation of the old Jewish ghetto in the Third Ward, where his grandparents "had struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered," into a slum settled by black southern migrants who "lived the most squalid of lives and dreamed in their fetid mattresses of the piny smell of Georgia nights." That powerful image of urban decline, so eloquently brought to modern American literature in Roth's bittersweet story of Jewish life and love across the Newark City Line, had been presented earlier in the 1940s by a talented young author, Curtis Lucas, in *Third Ward Newark*, which was the first novel about black ghetto life in Newark. Years later the image was reintroduced by the Newark writers Nathan Heard and Amiri Baraka. In their works, and in dozens of official studies of ghetto life, the interplay between Newark's infamous racial prejudice, social misery and individual fortitude was brought center stage. We learned of the complex customs of the city's black residents, the susceptibility of Newark's poor to the pathologies of their dreadful communities, their rage at white folks and their rage at one another. We learned that there was a perception of two Newarks, one black and Latino, desperately poor and isolated, the other white, powerful and duplicitous. And we learned that in Newark, no less than other American cities, life in the ghettos was inextricably linked to life and decisions made downtown. These insights, found in novels, in the rhetoric of local activists, in post-riot studies, television documentaries and the American press, forged an image of a city divided as much by race as by the conflicting intentions of its residents and their neighborhoods, a city shameful for its seemingly callous indifference to

both the human capacity to exploit others and to suffer.

It has been quite a remarkable achievement, then, for Newark over the past several years to virtually reinvent itself as a city of hope. One of the reasons for this achievement is the partnership which now exists between Newark's most powerful private interests, state and county officials and minority leaders in local political organizations. This relatively new interracial coalition has made possible one of the most effective booster movements in the history of modern Newark. It has at once blunted the historic criticism that Newark is a white man's town and given to contemporary boosterism a compelling style not found earlier in this century. The revitalization of Newark is now seen as a part of a larger social effort to uplift the city's poor black and Latino residents. There is also a considerable emphasis in Newark on the formation of partnerships designed to discourage mistrust, racial insensitivity and the duplication of reform efforts. Indeed, at times it seems as if the attempt to rejuvenate Newark has become a corollary to the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s. The city's most visible and effective booster, Mayor Sharpe James, invokes the image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his public speeches and, along with other minority leaders, has successfully created the perception that the interests of downtown capital development are intertwined with those of Newark's poor and historically marginalized groups.

At the same time, the image of Newark's poor neighborhoods has been recast. During the years that surrounded the riots of 1967, those communities were often pictured as desperate places close to an explosive reaction to the many injustices they faced. They were, as the title of Nathan Wright's 1968 book suggested, *Ready to Riot*. That local perception, supported by some of the most frightening statistics in the nation on poverty levels, infant mortality, crime, venereal diseases and sub-standard housing, fueled a decade-long struggle by blacks to wrest from white ethnics control of City Hall, the Board of Education, the Newark police force and other city agencies. Newark, which was one of the first American cities to witness the power of community-based political organization, became a springboard for a black nationalist movement that swept American cities in the 1960s and early '70s.

Few leaders in Newark now find comfort or propriety in that image. On the contrary, they have deflected community-based radicalism into well-established political and bureaucratic channels and condemn violence as an inappropriate response to social injustice and local problems. This has created an image of Newark's poor neighborhoods as waiting

patiently for downtown revitalization to reach their streets, an image that is nuanced in favor of the existing interracial coalition of black, white ethnic and Latino leaders in the public and private sectors.

And so as this century draws to a close, Newark has managed to present to the larger public compelling images of renewal that offer some hope for the future. The callous indifference that once characterized public reaction to Newark's twentieth-century decline has been supplanted to a great extent by a thoughtful concern over past mistakes in housing, employment and education. And there is now widespread agreement among federal and state officials that the city is important to the economy and self-image of this metropolitan region. A new generation of public officials, business leaders and scholars has concluded that Newark was weakened far more by racism and callous urban policies that stigmatized it than by the moral turpitude of its residents. Federal neglect of cities and the reliance on market forces to bring about urban recovery which characterized the Reagan-Bush reign are now seen as costly mistakes, yet that official indifference galvanized pro-urban forces, including mayors, progressive corporate heads, neighborhood leaders, urban white ethnics, blacks, Latinos and policy specialists. Indeed, Newark has been remarkably successful in creating an image of unity between the interests of neighborhoods and the downtown, corporations and small businesses, rich and poor, and minorities and whites. It may be that having suffered through one of the nation's most destructive riots in the late 1960s, and years of dwindling self-identity, Newark is simply too exhausted to keep alive the traditional "we versus them" dissidence.

Nonetheless, there are limits to how long the constructed image of a revitalized city can last in the face of real problems in the lives of residents and their communities. Earlier periods of optimistic imaging, such as the 1920s and 1950s, ultimately collided with the concrete manifestations of urban crisis, the first during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the second during the racial tensions of the 1960s. One should fear that the current popularity of Renaissance Newark, and other forms of contemporary boosterism, may indeed face a similar fate. First, there does not exist much of an effort to link Newark's revitalization and its imagery to a wider social transformation in the city. Because cities such as Newark are at the mercy of an array of international, national and local economic forces, not to mention the nation's unpredictable political mood, they must inevitably create the illusion that the lives of their residents are improving even when objective standards for making that claim do not exist. This is not so much an articulation of official deceit as it is a

desperate attempt to obscure problems with positive illusions in the hope that conditions will ultimately improve as a result of better marketing. In his fourth State of the City address on January 23, 1990, Mayor James, for example, claimed that "Newark is well on its way to a full recovery, and to brighter tomorrows, brighter than any of our yesterdays. Then, Newark can once again claim its rightful place not only as the largest city in New Jersey, but also the best city by far."

Such unbridled optimism, as previously noted, has a long tradition in Newark, yet it is of no small significance that Mayor James is among the first of the city's black elected officials to use it so effectively. Nonetheless, the Mayor and other civic boosters face the growing disparity between the image of Newark as a phoenix rising from the ashes and the crumbling way of life in many areas of the city. At some point the sharp differences between image and reality will imperil the delicate coalition of interests that has taken shape over the past decade.

Making matters worse is the fact that the benefits of a healthy image have become less tangible for Newark's most disadvantaged residents. In many black and Latino districts, where community integrity and a sense of belonging to the entire city have become a distant memory, it is now all the more difficult to demonstrate how a revitalized downtown area favorably intersects with the neighborhood. The recent history of Newark's black communities illustrates this problem.

In the years that surrounded the riots, black neighborhoods here, despite their poverty, were far more energetic places than they are now. Segregation, though an indignity which blacks had challenged since the beginning of the twentieth century, fostered remarkable resilience in the way the community conducted its affairs. From the 1940s through the '60s, the ghetto was also more socially integrated than now: a network of religious, commercial, social service and volunteer organizations helped stabilize the lives of most neighbors and enforced among all but the most incorrigible standards of social civility. Within those communities there was an active group of black professionals, trade unionists, ministers and clubwomen whose attacks against injustices and inequities became emblematic of modern black community development. But the decline of that old ghetto, the first ghetto, was to become one of the unforeseen consequences of the Civil Rights Movement. The end of the most blatant forms of racial segregation in housing, employment and education presented some blacks and members of other minority groups with professional and residential opportunities far beyond the racially circumscribed world of their grandparents. In short, changing times and

social reform helped to erode what two generations of black Newarkers had built for themselves. Some of those who provided leadership for the first ghetto are no longer with us, and some have moved out of Newark into the increasingly integrated suburbs. The departure of those who were shaped by a distinct ethos of black community service during the era of segregation, which occurred at a time when the social structure of the inner city was unraveling, weakened most black neighborhoods. As a result, Newark's poor are now more isolated than ever before, isolated not only from whites but from upwardly mobile blacks as well. And so, while it is important and probably advisable for black elected officials to search for ways to link the downtown's boom and the rhetoric of optimism to the quality of life throughout the city, past experience shows that communities rarely reap such benefits. When they do, or when they perceive that such benefits are possible, it comes mainly through the persistent efforts of neighborhood leaders rather than politicians. In a city wherein the articulation of community interests comes primarily from elected officials, as is the case in Newark, those interests will be muted by the pragmatic tendencies of local politics. In this sense, liberal officials, such as those in Newark, essentially pursue conservative objectives.

The continued usefulness of the rhetoric of optimism, then, will depend a great deal on how life in poor and middle-class communities is perceived over the coming years. The immediate future may well be problematic, largely because Newark's decline has been so profound that it has become in economic infrastructure and demographic character a fundamentally different city. Modern American civilization has a shabby track record in recognizing the importance of cities having mostly dark residents. In the competitive arena of national politics, it is unlikely that the white population, now largely residing in the suburbs, will envision its future as hinged to the fortunes of blacks and Latinos. After all, urban minorities are generally perceived as having already placed too great a drain on public resources and patience. There is also little indication that the rhetoric of optimism and efforts at downtown revitalization will cause a sea change in metropolitan demographics. Despite the seductive power of boosterism on those who sentimentally remember the golden age of urban America, predominantly poor and stigmatized cities such as Newark have not been able to reclaim the population lost to the suburbs. They have great difficulty convincing suburban residents to support their educational, public safety and social welfare agencies through increased taxation or through a shift in resources to the least fortunate urban areas. Race, not surprisingly, explains this indifference, but also

the long-standing American tradition of local control and affiliation militates against the formation of an inner-city-suburban axis. New Jersey, once thought of as the nation's most urbanized state, is actually its most suburbanized state. That fact, when considered within the context of metropolitan social politics, places Newark at a great disadvantage.

This is not to suggest, however, that the construction of an image of revitalization and optimism is without value. In Newark that image has as much influence as any good advertising commercial. It fosters a sense of momentum which over a short period of time can combat local apathy and despair. If carefully orchestrated, it can help local residents and those who live outside the city transcend the customary prejudices that come from racial posturing and conflicting views of American life. And it is far more advantageous to the life of a troubled city than the fratricidal politics that marked Newark during the 1960s and '70s.

Yet, one must always be careful about the construction of any image that has diminishing relevance to what people come to know about their lives and the forces which shape their immediate surroundings. In a city like Newark, which has kept its three images delicately balanced between the disappointments and betrayals of the past and the collective hope for a better future, it is fair to say that wherever Newark is going its neighborhoods and residents must get there first. And if that is not to be the case, our boosters must give a good account of why, after so much optimism, the city once again failed to fulfill promises made to its native sons and daughters.

Rutgers University, Newark Campus
April 10, 1993

The Myth of the Renaissance City

The words tend to be harsh: cold, cruel, stark, poverty-stricken, toxic, violent. To know the spirits of the place is to feel a deep and hurtful kind of blues, a blues of heroism and horror where dreams are twisted into nightmares in the post-industrial urban-American tragedy, a blues where the character of the rhythm is tough and the melody is haunted by a profound sense of loss.

Driving from the west, across the mountains that lie beyond the first tier of suburban towns, the city appears down in the valley, foreshadowed by the Manhattan skyline that lies directly to the east. Except on an unusually clear day, Newark's dozen or so skyscrapers rise from the center of downtown in a polluted haze, the sky a pallid blue, the undersides of clouds colored gray. Driving from the east at sunset across the iron expanse of the Pulaski Skyway, which rises over the Jersey City swamps (the area that Jack Kerouac immortalized many years ago as "the armpit of the world"), the sky turns into lurid phosphorescent hues of purple and red.

Newark, New Jersey. Catastrophe City. Known to politicians and corporate leaders as the Renaissance City and "one of the most livable cities in America." On the real side, the gleaming glass-covered postmodern office towers downtown are surrounded by unprecedented decay. In Newark, the "inner city" has become the whole city. If you want to see real-life tragedy, drive around the Central Ward, where the ghosts of those now gone haunt an eerie, almost rural landscape in which dilapidated clapboard houses sit scattered around vacant lots, burnt-out apartment buildings and empty factories. The long-standing economic depression, the exodus of one-third of the population, and the ravages of AIDS combine to evoke an overwhelming feeling of loss. In short, New-

ark looks like a broken town. It's a mashed-down and barren look, the major commercial avenues dreary strips of boarded-up buildings, take-out food joints and cheap grocery stores. The streets are dangerous, but the general impression is one of boredom.

The hard truth is that in people terms Newark has become a statistical nightmare. Thirty percent of the population has moved out (from 390,000 in 1967 to 345,000 in 1980 to 275,000 in 1990). One in three of those who remain are on public assistance. The median-income level is below the official poverty line (\$12,000 for a family of three). Affordable housing is so inadequate that social service professionals estimate a homeless population of up to thirteen thousand people. We're known as the car-theft capital of the country, notorious for our "doughnut boys." We rank as the worst city in America for AIDS cases per capita; hospital administrators and doctors estimate that twenty-five thousand Newarkers may be HIV-positive, which figures out to nine percent of the population. We rank at the bottom in infant mortality rates, near the top in new TB cases. Thirty to fifty percent of the babies born each year at University Hospital are thought to be drug-exposed.

But if perseverance and resilience in the face of adversity and the ability to improvise in situations of radical disjuncture are what the blues are all about, then there is neither irony nor mystery in the fact that Newark continues to be fertile ground for the blues aesthetic. Is it just a coincidence that America called on one of our voices (Whitney Houston) to lead the country into war with song? Is it an accident that people all over the world are singing and dancing the songs of our teenagers? What does it mean for an internationally influential form of contemporary dance music, sometimes called deep house, to be defined by artists from Newark? How is it that Sarah Vaughn, the world's greatest jazz singer, Amiri Baraka, the poet laureate of the freedom struggle and theoretician of the black aesthetic, and Jimmy Scott, America's deepest ballad singer, have all formed their art in Newark?

One thing is certain: it helps to be tough. As Victoria Ndugu, a Kenyan emigré social worker, said to me, "If you can survive in Newark, you can survive anywhere." Or, as Daryl Rochester put it to me, "In Newark, you have to be always *on point*." The cruelty of it all has gotten so outrageous these last years that you really have to wonder about the psychological consequences . . . I think about how hard it is for the women, and the kids, and the older people, and the young men. I think about the indignities that young women endure on the streets every day; the mothers trying to raise a family on \$423 a month (AFDC payment

for a mother and two children); the kids trying to thrive in treacherous circumstances characterized by the phrases *there are no children here* and *savage inequalities*; all the brothers in prison on drug possession charges (New Jersey's prison population went from 6,542 to 22,033 between 1980 and 1990); the haunting legacy of Newark's heroin problem. The amazing thing is that there's so much talent and creativity. Whenever I get overwhelmed by the oppression of it all I'm always saved by how inspiring the people continue to be—people like William Linder, who plays such a beautiful blues on his homemade instrument called the New Community Corporation, and Alex Boyd, the late James Brown and the people who have reinvigorated the library. I think about the deep humanism of some of Newark's children, people like Nathan Heard and Jimmy Scott and Justice William Brennan. I think about Ace Mungin saying, "Newark is a Blue Magic-Delfonics-Whispers kind of town."

THE MYTH OF THE RENAISSANCE CITY

The possibilities of Newark's rebirth from the ashes of the 1970s, when it was commonly considered the worst city in America, are real, but enormous obstacles remain. While its fate is tied up with the decline of the older northeastern industrial cities, it does have some important strategic advantages: it serves as New Jersey's financial center, it's only a fifteen-minute train ride from Manhattan, and it's a key spot in the transportation grid, not just as a crossroads of the northeast highway and rail network, or for its port, but also for being home to one of the nation's fastest growing airports, which could turn out to be a key link in the future globalization of trade. Newark's renaissance remains more hope than reality, however, as the facts reveal.

Looked at one way, Newark has turned into an extreme case study in the bitter failure of the Great Migration—one hundred thousand black people migrated to the city between 1950 and 1967, only to find that the city's jobs were destined for the suburbs. Newark's decline to basket-case status is ultimately rooted in the collapse of its job base. Because of New Jersey's strong home-rule laws, Newark has always been a small city, approximately twenty-four square miles, and unnaturally separated from the surrounding towns. This has made for a chronically weak tax base, since the city's small size and its concentration of universities (the highest in the nation per square mile), state, federal and county buildings, combined with the land occupied by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (which owns the port and the airport), means that approxi-

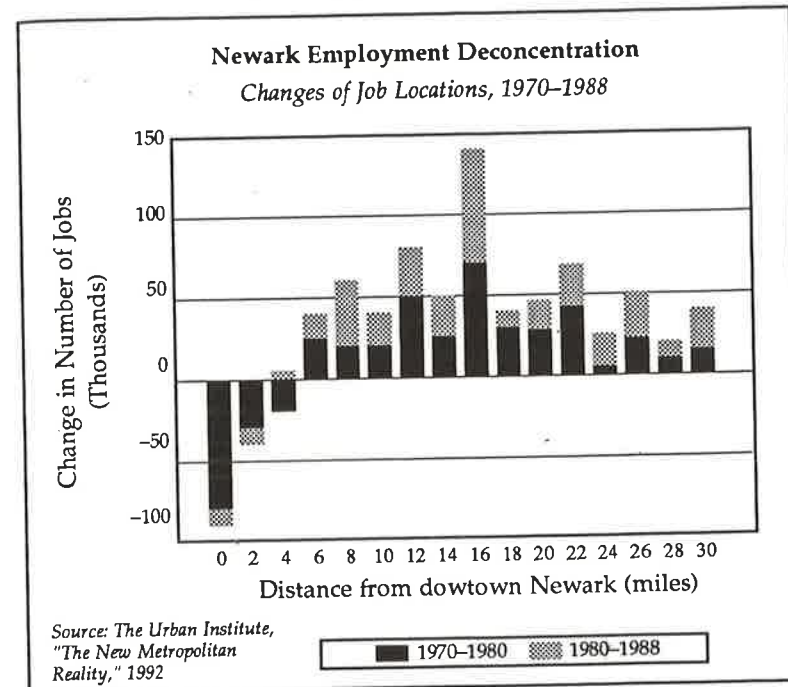
mately seventy percent of the city's real estate is tax-exempt. Compounding the problem is the tax-abated status of a good portion of the remaining land, the result of government attempts to stimulate development in the last decade. The tax structure is so out of whack that property hasn't been revalued since the sixties because of the firestorm it would create among middle-class homeowners (the average single-family home is tax-assessed at \$12,950).

Newark's manufacturing strength in the fifties helped support a population of over 425,000 people and half as many jobs. Although suburbanization had shrunk the population to 375,000 by 1970, the job base still held steady at around 200,000. However you analyze the synergy between the "riots" and the larger trend of suburbanization, one thing is clear: Newark literally fell apart in the seventies, when it lost over 73,000 jobs. Approximately 10,000 more were lost in the eighties, reducing Newark to a city of 275,000 people and 117,000 jobs as of 1990. As the chart on the following page shows, net job creation was restricted to locations that are at least six miles from downtown Newark. Indeed, 97% of the 142,297 new jobs created in the Greater Newark area from 1970 to 1988 occurred in the suburbs. [Notes on the chart: the bar at "0" represents all of Newark; only data on New Jersey is included.]

The twin trends of deindustrialization and suburbanization have hit Newark hard. New Jersey lost 350,000 manufacturing jobs between 1969 and 1990 (from 55% to 16% of all jobs) as the state moved to a service-dominated economy. And it's gotten worse in the nineties—total job loss has continued, despite the "recovery" (Essex County has lost two percent of its job base since 1991). And the interstate highway legislation of 1956 helped accelerate the exodus of jobs by fostering the development of suburban growth corridors—Edison, Piscataway and Franklin, which sit along I-287, now have roughly the same number of jobs as Newark.

Newark in the nineties, in addition to serving as a lab experiment on the effects of America's more severe social problems, has become a new frontier in American urban policy. The origins of this new frontier lie in the efforts of business leaders, public policy planners and elected officials to develop new ideas on how to promote economic development. In the mid-eighties these ideas coalesced into an inchoate ideology, known as the "public-private partnership," which rejects the traditionally held view that there is a fundamental contradiction between public and private interests, theorizing instead that the corporate sector can best guarantee economic vitality and that government is most effective when it acts as a facilitator of business development. "Collaboration" is the op-

THE MYTH OF THE RENAISSANCE CITY



erative concept, implying a new sense of civic responsibility, but in concrete terms, this seems to come down to the idea of the city administration inviting the corporate leadership to City Hall to direct economic development. "[T]he doors of government were thrown open to . . . a management team from the business community," as the city's former business administrator, Richard Monteihl, put it in an article in *Standard & Poor's Credit Week*. The management team is Renaissance Newark, Inc. (RNI), a privately-funded development corporation set up by the city's Big Five—New Jersey Bell, PSE&G, Prudential, Mutual Benefit Life and First Fidelity Bank. RNI's president, Everett Shaw, serves as deputy mayor for economic development and as chairman of the city's Development Team, his salary paid with corporate money.

Whatever success Newark has experienced in recent years is mainly due to the fact that the city was able to tap into the office-building boom which dominated development in New Jersey during the eighties (80% of all commercial office space in the state was built in the decade). The city offered low out-of-pocket costs, and its strategic transportation location made it more attractive than isolated suburban corporate com-

plexes. What the new partnership idea accomplished was to make office building synonymous with "Renaissance." But the major effect of this new ideology has been the massive public subsidization of private real-estate development deals through an elaborate web of tax incentives and abatements. The Fox-Lance Tax Abatement Law, for instance, allows a developer who buys a piece of land designated by city agencies as "blighted" or as part of an "urban renewal area" to enter into a "financial agreement" with the city whereby the corporation pays an annual service charge in lieu of taxes. It's been a real estate developer's dream, resulting in six billion dollars in downtown office development in the last seven years.

A cornerstone of the partnership is the practice of using the publicly-elected administration in City Hall as a kind of front man—thus bestowing respectability and the illusion of public support—for the furtherance of mega real-estate development deals. RNI's glossy bimonthly magazine, *Renaissance Reporter*, is a shameless and revealing exposition of the new ideology. Its December/January, 1991-92 cover story on how RNI organized the city's richest commercial real estate developers was entitled, "The Sharper Newark Campaign: The Selling of the City":

Seated around the large conference table 14 months ago was what appeared to be a diverse, competitive and at times combative group. The one common bond they shared was involvement in the development of Newark's real estate. The one common goal sought by the group's facilitator [Everett Shaw] was to gain their acceptance to "collectively sell the city."

Business leaders who are not accountable to the public tend to become the masterminds of public policy planning. And role models. Thus, we can read in the July/August 1990 *Renaissance Reporter* a celebration of the RNI chairman, Henry E. Kates (now a disgraced CEO who presided over the largest insurance company failure in U.S. history, but at the time a corporate role model), which pays tribute to "his belief and commitment to corporate responsibility to the community."

In this kind of government-protected "free-market" environment, the city's largest real-estate developer, Hartz Mountain, can build a 16-story, 100-million-dollar office tower, to be leased by Blue Cross and Blue Shield (which found it could save millions by relocating its suburban workers), and not only does the project receive a twenty-year tax abatement, but Blue Cross gets a fifteen-year abatement extension on its Washington

Street headquarters. Subsequently, Blue Cross reached an agreement with the City Council whereby it will donate a half-million dollars over the next five years to various non-profit community projects, starting with one councilman's pet project. Another councilman hailed the agreement as "the meaning of the phrase 'public-private partnership.'"

At its heart, the Renaissance is a politically conservative idea that fails to address the city's root problems; it abets the conservative political trend of making misery invisible. The emphasis on downtown development and tax abatements addresses neither the city's historically weak tax base nor the depressed job market (since most of the decent jobs are taken by suburbanites). The partnership is really what might be called corporatism dressed up in the language of cooperation; it starts out innocently enough, with talk about cutting red tape, but at bottom it's really a vehicle for implementing short-term profit strategies. It positions the private sector as collaborator in government's work and it revolves around the idea of making "inner cities" "attractive for investment," but the "community" has virtually no role in shaping policy; it is used mainly to provide legitimacy. What we've seen in Newark has been the growth of a shadow government not accountable to the public. It's all an example of Reagan-era trickle-down theories and a demonstration of the collapse of the Democratic Party as an agent of working-class interests (almost all elected officials in Newark are Democrats).

We've heard much quoting of financial statistics about how much development there has been in Newark, but most of the new projects have been in service industries, especially legal and financial, and they have had little effect on the job market in the city. It's been a classic mismatch of jobs-to-workforce, and it mirrors the troubling American trend of increasing numbers of people being marginalized—most of the good jobs are taken by suburbanites, while vast numbers of people remain frozen out of the work force. This is easy to understand by looking at just what these new buildings are: a law school, a legal center, the Gateway corporate complex, the new New Jersey Transit headquarters, a hospital extension, a federal courthouse.

We've had six billion dollars in investment, yet the tax rate continues to rise and the mayor is forced to cut the budget, lay off workers and reduce services. One of the traditional rules-of-thumb that economists use to judge a city's viability is the ratio of people in the city on a working day to the number of residents, a two-to-one ratio considered as the breaking point. In Newark the ratio is now about four-to-one, meaning that most of the money earned here is spent elsewhere and not recycled

through the neighborhoods. As Monsignor William Linder has said, "You could go downtown between eight and nine a.m. and you wouldn't see anybody coming in out of Newark neighborhoods. You see them coming out of garages. . . . Do not rely on corporations. They take the money out of the community."

The new frontier has cut up Newark into two worlds—visions of money downtown and tales from the dark side in the "neighborhoods." The weird thing about these glass-enclosed towers is that they literally reflect only themselves, they reinforce social distinctions with spatial distinctions. The optimistic tones of politicians and business leaders often seem like a form of myopia and denial made possible by physical distance and separation. The early Gateway-complex model of solitary, self-enclosed buildings has progressed to a more ambitious attempt to carve out the geography of the center city. The "inner city" has been transformed by a policy of urban removal into a security zone where no one actually lives anymore. A large circle has been carved out over the last twenty years from Penn Station south to the new Federal Courthouse complex, west to the University of Medicine and Dentistry, north through Rutgers, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, St. Michael's Hospital, Blue Cross and New Jersey Bell, and east down along the waterfront back to Penn Station. Tens of thousands of units of affordable housing have been destroyed and the ensuing development has been restricted to office buildings, courthouses and jails, and hospitals (one *Renaissance Reporter* cover story was entitled "Newark's Hyperactive Hospitals").

The deficient moral heart of the public-private idea can be seen most blatantly when contrasting the proliferation of downtown office towers against the wholesale destruction of public housing projects. The exodus of people out of the city has been accompanied by an even greater decline in the housing stock, a decline magnified by the policy of the scandal-ridden and deposit-rich Newark Housing Authority to physically destroy thirty-nine of its forty-six high-rise apartment buildings (over half of its 13,000 apartments are already unoccupied), without any plan to build replacements. So while the NHA sits on a deposit account of over one-hundred-million dollars, it has one of the highest vacancy rates of any housing authority in the nation (twenty-nine percent); while the vacancy rate in the private apartment-rental market is at an all-time low, rents are high enough that many residents are forced to pay over fifty percent of their income for substandard apartments. Ever since urban renewal became urban removal, there's been an unstated policy in Newark of forced demographic change, i.e., the removal of poor black people

from the center city (one of the major causes of the riots), and it has been accomplished with the collusion of (black) political leaders (evidenced most symbolically by former Mayor Kenneth Gibson's contract to build an upscale condo development on the site of the evacuated Columbus Homes).

The public-relations sophistication of the downtown interests is evident in the latest development project, the two-hundred-fifty-million-dollar Performing Arts Center, launched with across-the-board support from both the political establishment and the state's corporate leadership. It's hard to argue with the idea of building a rival to Lincoln Center in Newark, or with the hiring of Philip Thomas, the respected founder of the Carter G. Woodson Foundation, as education director, but one has to wonder about the motives behind the project and its effect on the city. Considering that the city already has one of the finest concert halls in the country in Symphony Hall, just what is this center supposed to be for, anyway? If you listen closely to what the people behind the center say on this point, you find that it is essentially for entertainment for suburbanites. Think opera and the Bolshoi Ballet. It is based on good market research—there is a pool of 650,000 New Jersey "art-lovers" who would rather avoid the trip into Manhattan—but it has little to do with the social fabric in Newark. Being built on the single largest remaining tract of center-city real estate, which sits adjacent to the dormant Passaic River waterfront, Seventy-four percent of the first one-hundred-million dollars raised by the private, nonprofit New Jersey Performing Arts Center has been financed from public sources: 61.5 million from the state, 10 million from the city, and 1.2 million from HUD. But the one-hundred-fifty-million-dollar first stage of the project will result only in a single, mixed-use building housing a 2,700-seat multi-purpose hall, a 500-seat theater and a combination of retail shops, restaurants and banquet facilities, although it will include a 2,000-car underground garage which will both service the downtown office towers and insure direct accessibility for suburbanites, who will be able to reach the center by train or car without having to pass through city streets. Later phases of the project call for private development of office and retail buildings on the remainder of the site. Although the mayor trumpets the project as a stimulus for a vital night life (downtown is a virtual ghost town after dark), like the other real-estate developments, it will not be contiguous to a single neighborhood.

The Arts Center is designed by Los Angeles architect Barton Myers as a "people-friendly" environment with a large plaza and open sightlines,

but the humanistic aesthetics will no doubt be tempered by the bleak ecology of the site, sitting as it does on the edge of a highway overlooking the sludge-filled waters of the Passaic River, which runs along the banks of the city's Ironbound section, one of America's great ecological disaster zones, a cancer-producing melange of smokestacks, incinerators and abandoned tracts of land so toxic from the ravages of the petro-chemical industry they are considered unfit for human contact. The Arts Center does, however, offer hope for the creation of an arts district capable of spurring gentrification, something which hasn't occurred yet in Newark, although it's difficult to imagine yuppies and buppies buying into such a devastated postmodern aesthetic. More significantly, the project will pump up downtown real estate values and holds out the possibility of a bonanza for the owners of waterfront real estate.

Meanwhile, at the other end of Broad Street, Symphony Hall sits idle, a reminder that weaving a stronger social fabric has been neglected in favor of the short-sighted and profit-driven schemes of the Broad Street interests. At best, the myth of the Renaissance City is public-relations hype, or just wishful thinking. At worst, it's a cruel, one-sided game of the dozens, with the elite signifyin' on the first renaissance (the one back in 1970, when hopes for democracy and social justice were running wild in the streets) while the voices of the valley remain muted. The light reflected off all the glittering office towers downtown does not shine on the neighborhoods, where people struggle to find a path through the darkness, a darkness that's become so profound it's damn-near biblical. "Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ." Like that.

POLITICS IN NEWARK AFTER "BLACK MEN CONQUERED"

The political roots of the contemporary crisis in Newark can be traced back two decades to 1970, the watershed year in the city's politics, when a community-based coalition of black people took control of City Hall by electing Ken Gibson as the city's first black mayor, once and for all overturning a corrupt and racist white political establishment. The seventies saw a marked decrease in corruption and institutionalized racism and a consolidation of black political control in the city administration. Access to city jobs opened up to blacks and Latinos. The police force was integrated. Steady, if slow, progress was made in increasing black-owned business contracts with the city. And more progressive, humane policies

were pursued in providing services to those most in need, especially in the areas of health services for the poor and the elderly. There's no question that these were bottom-line advances, but what became apparent with time was that larger social and economic changes were transforming the city in ways that the new black political establishment was unable to effectively counteract.

As we've seen in Newark, where unprecedented misery has arisen under a black mayor, city council, board of education, etc., the election of black public officials has not been the culmination of the fifties and sixties movements for social justice. In fact, Newark is a good example of how black political strategies have been transformed from a bottom-up to a top-down model, from a broad-based movement to a model based on the idea of insider-politics. My point is not to criticize elected officials for selling out or betraying the race, that is to say, on racial grounds, nor to impugn their character (in fact, they have been, in American political terms, a fairly progressive group and considerably less corrupt than their white predecessors), but rather on political and moral grounds. What Newark makes clear, as William Julius Wilson noted in his study of Chicago, is that "neither black-power nor civil-rights visions have sufficiently related the fate of poor blacks and Latinos to the workings of the modern American economy and therefore have been unable to explain the worsening conditions of people in cities" like Newark. The emphasis on "social values," whether from black, white, liberal or conservative viewpoints, has obscured the fact that Newark has been going through a depression, and that its problems stem from a severe shortage of jobs.

The shortcomings of politics in Newark are a reflection of the general trend away from the popular mobilization of the sixties. What the last twenty years in Newark reveal is the naiveté of political models based on "race." The city is one more chilling case-study of the limits of race-based politics without addressing issues of class and accountability. Self-promoting, racially-identified politicians, not accountable, all too easily become attached to corporate interests. And while it's easy to blame it all on elected officials and "the leadership," the problems are deeper and more disturbing than that. The social fabric, all those things that make for a vital and vibrant public life, was ripped apart in the eighties as never before, turning cities like Newark into one-dimensional communities of concentrated poverty where there is hardly any middle class at all. Although clichés about the middle class are trendy, the truth is that the exodus of the middle class, black and white, has sucked the center out of

political life in the city. In twenty years (1970–1990), over one-hundred thousand people left the city, but blacks as a percentage of the population went only from fifty-four to fifty-eight percent, which means that whatever the color, working/middle class people have gotten the hell out of Newark, off to somewhere their kids can grow up in a decent environment and maybe get a shot at attending some good schools.

One of the end results of this demographic change has been the low level of political and civic involvement on the part of a poverty-dominated citizenry, so that while the class interests of the city have made for respectably liberal politicians (in American terms), an enormous gulf has developed between the elected elite and a politically apathetic populace too involved in scuffling to get over to really demand political accountability. Which is a situation ideal for insider politics. Consequently, there is very little substantive political debate in the city. We've seen political and religious "leaders" calling for a black sheriff and a black prosecutor, for example, but absolutely no public debate on what the candidates actually stand for. We have a black mayor, but he ran unopposed in the last election. Heaven knows, the problems are profound, yet there is not a coherent alternative vision to the establishment. The schools have gradually deteriorated to the point where seventy-five percent of children in lower grades perform below state levels of proficiency and the state is threatening a takeover, yet in board of education elections fresh ideas and challenging proposals are nowhere to be seen. As Baraka likes to say, you can't claim to be a revolutionary if you can't even elect someone to the school board. (Sharpe James would tackle the problem of low voter turnout in school board elections by making it an appointed board, a view which typifies the insider-politics mind-set and the gulf between the elite and the poor.)

You can see the political ramifications of this political vacuum in how the mayor and the City Council sat on the fence while the Housing Authority went ahead with plans to destroy thirty-nine of its forty-six high-rise apartment buildings. It took a citizen's coalition (headed by a palefaced brother) to bring a successful lawsuit requiring a one-to-one replacement agreement (killing Gibson's condo-development deal). In the political discourse of the public-private partnership, the mayor lavishes praise on condo developers but doesn't demand affordable rental housing from the deposit-rich housing authority, settling instead for private developers setting aside ten percent of new condo developments for moderate-income applicants, an arrangement which has little effect in a city overwhelmingly poor and desperately in need of affordable rental hous-

ing. But then, this is hardly surprising in light of the recent revelations of the mayor's personal finances and his myriad real estate adventures; he has not only grossed \$900,000 from tickets sold to annual two-hundred-dollar-a-ticket birthday parties, much of it from municipal employees and corporations and lawyers doing business with the city, but since taking office he and his wife have invested more than a million dollars on five condos (two of them from developers who received tax abatements from the city), a 46-foot yacht and a summer home at the Jersey shore. (In an *Emerge* magazine profile, this aspiring entrepreneur even had the nerve to say that young people in Newark "are not really poor, they are poor in attitude.")

The lack of vision in the partnership, as revealed in the approach to the housing crisis, reveals a preoccupation with short-sighted motives and a contempt for popular political power, which is, of course, something you don't have to worry about when the political leadership feels no moral imperative to make social justice an economic question to be fought over. As Vic DeLuca, chairman of the Coalition for Low Income Housing, said, "There is a lack of will in this city to build low-income housing. We wish city officials would go to Washington and Trenton and push for housing assistance the way they do for a performing arts center or a monorail to Newark Airport."

Has there ever been a better example of political and moral failure than the response to the AIDS crisis? It was well-known that Newark has been for many years a heroin capital, and we should have been a leader in community outreach, drug treatment, and needle-exchange programs, but the political and religious establishments have generally tried to sidestep the issue. Some even had the gall to start an annual benefit for women and children with AIDS, as though gay men and IV drug users are somehow unworthy, further revealing the distance we've come from a radical moral agenda. And perhaps most devastating of all, and the issue which no political leader in Newark has had the vision or courage to confront, is the criminalization of a generation through the war on drugs. Yet there hasn't been significant debate on the issue.

Of course, it's all very American: the cooptation of public policy by business interests and the declining influence of organized labor; the isolation of blacks and Latinos in decaying urban pockets of concentrated poverty; the inclination to explain social problems in terms of race; moralizing about the drug problem; increased violence and the collapse of community values. In fact, one of the disturbing lessons of recent years is the tendency for black politics to drift away from the radical social-

justice ideas of people like Ella Baker and A. Philip Randolph, who, after all, based their strategies and analyses on an everyday, regular-people foundation, that is to say, from a bottom-up perspective.

A Certain Style of Rage: Amiri Baraka in the '90s

I am a believer in the power of forgiveness and I want to love this man, who has been such a great influence on those of us who came of age in the sixties and seventies. This man of whom Arnold Rampersad wrote, "He stands with Wheatley, Douglass, Dunbar, Hughes, Hurston, Wright and Ellison as one of the eight figures . . . who have significantly affected the course of African-American literary culture." But Amiri Baraka makes me sad.

We admire his personal courage, his down-to-earth love of black style, his penetrating critique of capitalism and of white supremacy, the way he exposes himself in his writing. But we are also repelled by his meanness and the line of madness running through the work. Deservedly famous as poet, playwright, critic of the music, and seminal figure in the Black Arts Movement, he has become more of a polemicist than anything else in recent years. While his writing has seemed on the verge of drowning in political dogmatism, there is an almost unbearable tension between love and cruelty in the life and the work that seems to arise out of some truly frightening personal drama. "My heart is cast in bitter / metal"¹ was written almost thirty years ago, but it endures as a haunting refrain.

He was thirty-one-years old when he came home in 1966, and the city was never quite the same again. Since then, his story has been inextricably linked with Newark. This is true on many levels: in the way his style of rage seems to be almost a natural element of the city's environment; in the way his activism and writing epitomized the political and cultural transformation of the city in the late sixties and early seventies; and in the way his life and work in recent years express the bitterness and isolation of what Newark has become. The optimism of the late sixties is long gone: "We will make cities, even cities like Newark, beauti-

ful thrones of man and testaments to the ecstatic vision of the soulful."² The question here is, where is Amiri Baraka in the '90s?

It's impossible to understand Baraka without appreciating him in the context of Newark, especially in terms of what has happened over the course of the last twenty years, both politically and in terms of his personal life. The grand vision of a radically transformed city is now a distant memory. It's been a long time since he's had any real connection to the political life of the city; while he has retreated into the insular world of sectarian communist politics, the people he worked with in the late sixties now mostly scorn him. There are also less obvious, if no less bitter memories, such as the defeat of his ambitious Kawaida Towers low-income housing project, which he spent three years working on in the early seventies, only to see it sabotaged, first by Imperiale and his goons, who handcuffed themselves to the construction site, then by the police, the courts, the banks, and the politicians. In the end, unable to keep up with the escalating construction costs, he was hung out to dry in the sun. By that time he had converted to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung-Thought, his connection to the mainstream severed irrevocably. His marginalization in Newark was a bitter pill to swallow, but it's been magnified in recent years by the worldwide repudiation of communism. There has also been cause for bitterness on the personal side, too. There was that incident in the Village when he went off on the cops who tried to break up a fight between him and his wife, which resulted in his being sentenced to a year of weekend confinement at a halfway house. Then one son was imprisoned, another shot in the head on the streets of Newark and barely escaping with his life. And there is the dreadful environment that greets him everyday when he walks out of his house near the corner of South Tenth Street and Clinton Avenue, a once flourishing neighborhood that has been decaying for years.

He supposedly rejects the racial-hatred stuff now—remember "cracking steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth."³ Or "rape the white girls. Rape their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats"?⁴ But if you read his autobiography, written in 1984, he rejects it as *incorrect*—his confessions have little moral depth. When we look closely, certain traits remain. His communism propels him toward a progressive take on "race"; to wit, his criticism of "Jungle Fever": "You can't be against apartheid in South Africa and be for it here." But his autobiography has traces that raise the question of just how much he has changed. At one point, recalling his years growing up around Dey (pronounced "Die") Street, he writes, "white folks so full of shit they called it Day."⁵ In fact, Baraka's savage racial-



Baraka with his wife, Amina, and their son, Obalaji, approaching the Essex County Courthouse on January 4, 1968 to face sentencing on gun possession charges stemming from the 1967 "riots" (he was convicted by an all-white jury). After Judge Leon Kapp read Baraka's poem "Black People!" to the court, he sentenced Baraka to two and one-half to three years without parole and a fine of one thousand dollars. Baraka won a retrial and was acquitted.

ism seems but a reflection of a general psychological disposition. The targets change, but the rage and preoccupation with murder and betrayal remain. Buried deep inside is a conflict that causes him to project black as good and white as bad. The blacker one is, the better or truer one is, hence the vile color caste scheme running through the autobiography, which tends to rank black people along a color spectrum, from blue-black to yellow.

He thinks of himself as man of the working class, but he's always had an air of the self-righteous, gone-off-the-deep-end, middle-class intellectual about him. He pretends, for example, that black people reject communism because they are ill-informed, but his Stalinist take on life would be laughed out of any barbershop or beauty salon on the block. The need to erect the image of the intellectual bogeyman is no doubt one reason why he likes to live in Newark—such a backwater-type place affords him the illusion that he can get away with saying just about anything. And then, the impressive impoverishment of life here reinforces his reductionist class perspective. The fact that black folks have a more complex understanding of life seems to elude him. Several proud old-timers have told me that they don't listen to anything Baraka says or writes. That sort of attitude is not surprising in light of his often patronizing attitude, evidenced in the Spike Lee flap when he told us how "those of us unused to 'close reading' of films (or anything else, for that matter) or educated analysis are 'chumped off.'" ⁶ Furthermore, that when we "look" at stuff like Spike's films we "absorb" large doses of "Negro antiblackness." ⁷ Despite his big-daddy-rapper, bebop-hipster self-image, his use of the word "absorb" reveals how square and out of touch he can be. It's interesting how Baraka, the proletarian revolutionary, dismisses the profound democratic radicalism of SNCC people like Bob Moses as "pacifist" and less "militant" than people like Stokely Carmichael—a perspective that exemplifies the sectarianism and inept political thinking which helped destroy the movement in the sixties; while Bob Moses has gone on to develop a revolutionary way to teach kids math based on the principles of the early civil rights movement, Baraka endorses the introduction of Chris Whittle's Channel One TV program into the Newark schools—since video is the kids' new-fangled thang, he thinks they will "absorb" information better through a TV screen, not realizing that what kids really need are teaching techniques that tap into visual ways of thinking, that enable them to think for themselves. But then, the transfusion approach to education comes easy to politicians who base their methodologies on vanguard models for leading "the people."

My best up-close experience with Baraka came in a writing class I took in the basement of his house in the fall of 1980. He was an engaging teacher, endlessly fascinating in his approach to literature, making all kinds of thought-provoking connections between artists as diverse as Raymond Chandler, Mark Twain, Langston Hughes, Billie Holiday. But for me, it was a classic Baraka experience, filled with a certain tension between love and cruelty. Here was this great artist opening up his home, giving of himself to a bunch of wannabe writers from the community, and at two-and-a-half bucks a pop, but yet there was also a creepiness to it all, a severe, politically-correct feel neatly signified by the eight-by-ten photograph of Stalin that hung on the wall over his desk.

While Baraka has a genuine feel for, and understanding of, the music, his approach is often a strange mixture of funkiness and uptightness. You can see this in stuff like his line in *The Dutchman*: "If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music." ⁸ He likes to say good things about hip-hop and the angry tone of its lyrics, but the postmodern collage aesthetic of its sonic architecture and the way it borrows across cultural boundaries is beyond him. Which is not surprising, since he's never understood all that "loud-ass rock stuff" anyway. He could dig Earth, Wind & Fire, but he dismissed Funkadelic, Newark's greatest rock band, as "negative." For those of us who love club music, this man has also been exasperating. For him, disco always connoted death and the devil. Which is not surprising, either, given his notorious uptightness with sexuality. That is a long and tortured story, which we don't have the space to flesh out here, but it involves Baraka's infamous difficulty in dealing with the gay reality, the ferociousness of which provokes us to consider whether it's really about some primal conflict within him (cf. the homosexual passages in his autobiographical novel, *The System of Dante's Hell*). ⁹ This is a subtext that is continuous in his writing. He was forever condemning civil-rights activists not just as reformers but as "faggots." In the crazed mind-set of his cultural nationalism he wrote that most "white men are raised to be fags." ¹⁰ When disco hit, he wrote that "Frankie Cocker is a fag / humming on your radio" (to the tune of "London Bridge Is Falling Down"). ¹¹ This sexual uptightness can also be seen in his reading of the sassy "She's Gotta Have It" as reducing the black woman's struggle for equality to "nymphomania." And then there is the shocking line in his 1992 essay "Malcolm as Ideology" in which he describes a group of "middle-class Negroes" at a gathering at Howard University as "rubbing up against Malcolm like self-manipulated 'firesticks.'" ¹² He's too politically correct to call them fag-

gots in 1992, but those of us who know the etymology of "faggot" can only wonder whether this is a Freudian slip or a sign of his insincerity. And as for sincerity, what are we to make of this tenured college professor who invites CBS News into his living room so he can talk bad about "middle-class knee-grows"?

The most revealing portrait of Baraka in the '90s is to be found in "Malcolm as Ideology," which is included in *Malcolm X In Our Own Image*, edited by Joe Wood. What emerges is a picture of a deeply disturbed man. A man haunted by ghosts. A man whose sense of ethics has come unhinged. A man who comes off like a cornered animal for whom "by any means necessary" has become a personal code of conduct, even if it is all talk. It is a world teaming with "poison Negroes, poisoning our children"; "Negro body-snatchers"; "traitor Negroes who vilify, defame and frame black people"; "apprentice torturers"; "mercenaries of white supremacy."¹³ Who are these people? Child molesters? Serial killers? Agents of the South African security forces? No—he's describing black school teachers, journalists, Democratic politicians, even media personalities. Right-wing cranks like Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams push a reactionary agenda, but they are not fascists. And it's a disgrace to lump them together with decent, progressive black people like the writer Playthell Benjamin, whom Baraka repeatedly refers to, without explanation, as "Playtoy Beenyman." The fact that he doesn't attempt to explain this outrageous slander reveals Baraka's contempt for "the people," since most progressive folks who are familiar with Benjamin's work consider him to be an admirable representative of a radical, fiercely independent black American tradition. Evidently, what triggered this bit of hysteria is the fact that Benjamin had the audacity to openly disagree with Baraka's criticism of Spike, and to his face, and in public (on his radio show). If he thinks this man is a jerk, why not just say so? The unavoidable answer is that he's dishonest, a demagogue, one who confuses intellectual assent with emotional response—Baraka has a long history of that.

His *modus operandi* in "Malcolm as Ideology" is to identify a "retrograde trend" in America during the Reagan-Bush years and then to lump together whomever he doesn't like as a "black racist." He can't just criticize Spike as, say, square or conservative or as an immature storyteller—he has to equate "She's Gotta Have It" with "imperialism ruling through native agents." He can't construct a decent analysis of Henry Louis Gates, he has to accuse him not only of an attempt to disconnect literature from real life and to "render beauty and intelligence *neuter* and

abstract," but also of being one of "these bought-and-paid-for Negro white supremacist 'intellectuals' . . . whose notoriety is that now their *confessions of submission* can be included in the curricula." (Emphasis added.) His obsession with humiliating psychological code-words forces us to consider that the madness of his hate-filled late-sixties writings were not just a passing phase.

Even though Baraka is always referring to "scientific socialism" and materialist dialectics, his writing is riddled with highly personal obsessions. He thinks that the expansion of the "petty black bourgeoisie" is "a bitter irony." He is contemptuous of young black people who have "never lived in the ghetto." He denounces young black writers who have sought to develop ideas like "a new black aesthetic" and "the blues aesthetic," in order to make sense of how black culture and style interact with the culture at large in an age of mass communication, as being part of an attempt to "disconnect Black culture and art from its material history and revolutionary essence."

In "Malcolm as Ideology" we see how the complexities of real human beings can be reduced to political categories in the way Baraka interprets Malcolm's "internal" life as "ideological" and as a "casebook of ideological change, of social cause and effect." This attempt is too stiff and dogmatic to deal with the complexity of Malcolm the person, and so he doesn't bother to address the evidence compiled in Bruce Perry's flawed but fascinating and impressively researched biography, except to dismiss it as "calumny." And he uses the tactics of a scoundrel in convicting Perry of guilt by association for editing a book published by the Socialist Workers Party, even going so far as to liken him to a CIA proprietary out to cover Malcolm with "a barrage of psychopathic untruths." His need to make political hay out of Malcolm's life is such that he tells the lie that Malcolm was "leading the Black Liberation Movement" and therefore "doomed for assassination." He even writes that the assassins were the "U.S. government" when he knows full well that the real killers were NOI people from Mosque No. 25 in Newark.

Baraka gets so heated up in this essay because he knows that his best chance for gaining political influence is for him to appear as defender of Malcolm's legacy, but he is inept in his political analysis and he reveals how desperate he is: "We must protect Malcolm's life, because that is the only way we will protect the reality of our own." He concocts a personal connection by recalling "my meeting with Malcolm," in January of 1965, but there are no personal descriptions, only a report—actually, two sentences—of Malcolm's admonition to "*move the whole people*" and his view

that activists, "including myself," must "make *politically viable* a Black united front in the U.S." (Emphasis added.) Which is just the sort of thing that Baraka seems constitutionally incapable of. He goes on to stretch the idea of the united front into a call for an independent political party dedicated to "total U.S. social transformation," which in his delusion he envisions as "probably formed and, in the main, led by Afro-Americans, but open to the whole of the U.S. people."

Baraka seems capable only of reducing Malcolm to a slogan: "Self-Determination, Self-Respect, and Self-Defense." By basing his argument on this simple, self-referential "concept," he grabs at the illusion that revolutionary black politics can be resolved within the "black community." But the idea that "self-reliance" is an effective *political* strategy is, ultimately, reactionary—it's an outmoded theoretical construct, oblivious to the increasingly interdependent realities of life in the late twentieth century. (And what does self-determination mean, politically, for black people at this point?) The idea of "controlling the economics of the black community" is comforting, and its lullaby effect has been much in evidence in recent years, but it has very little to tell us about how to integrate black Americans into the functionings of an increasingly global economic reality, or of the difficulties of confronting the emerging transnational corporate power structures. His failure to construct even the semblance of a logical argument on these difficult questions is proof that he's playing the demagogue; what he's really trying to do is appeal to the tribal instinct as a way of increasing his own political influence.

One of my favorite places used to be the now-defunct White Star diner on Central Avenue in East Orange, a people-friendly place imbued with a definite working-class camaraderie, where you could have breakfast for a couple of bucks while digging one of those fast-disappearing jukeboxes wherein you could find original 45s by T-Bone Walker, Sarah Vaughan, Blue Magic—a near spectrum of post-World War II Afro-American music. I was deciding what to play on the morning of June 3, 1991, when I saw a stack of leaflets, one of which is reproduced on the following page. I sat down and read it while I was waiting for my eggs. When I finished reading it, the thirtysomething brother behind the counter looked at me and said, "What do ya think? Dirty politickin'?"

In order to understand this leaflet, it's necessary to know a few things.

1. Ralph Grant is a generally progressive guy, but he said very little which distinguished him as any different from the other candidates. And he made it clear that he was just as hell-bent on imprisoning young black people on drug-possession charges as the rest of them. (Interestingly,

Say No To The Politics of Colonialism

Vote RALPH T. GRANT
S H E R I F F

B-4
your self
for a change

They're signing a peace treaty in Angola today bringing an end to Portuguese Colonialism in Africa, but why is there still White Bossism and Colonialism here in Essex County?

The Star Ledger carried a story today reporting that three technically "black" mayors crawled out of Essex Democratic Chairman Durkin's plantation smokehouse, back pockets modestly stuffed with the obligatory po'kchops and with three ear to ear, head scratching, eye rolling, foot shuffling, "colored boy" grins, announced that they liked slavery and endorsed slavemaster Durkin's hand picked overseer.

At the end of their buck dance (which de ol time darkies did in de ol time racist story books) which they do to let you know that they got a few bucks or at least a few chops for their treachery and self hatred, they sang out in unison "Give Me Chattel Slavery Or Give Me Death!"

But seriously, this is how far away we are from self determination in Essex. When a qualified and progressive black candidate for Sheriff, like Ralph Grant begins to bring his message to the whole electorate, not only to Black people and Latinos, but to the entire rainbow of Essex County, then it is necessary that Durkin reach back even further into his plantation boss bag and drag three traitorous NayGrow so called politicians. Three "black" mayors whose very elected office was brought about by them lying to black people that they represented them, when its clear "Bookie" Brown (Orange), Cardell Cooper (E.Orange) and Michael Steele (Irvington) represent only one thing, continued knee dancing as bought and paid for house slaves.

We must not only come out in record numbers, Tuesday, June 4 and repudiate these technically colored Judases, by voting for RALPH T. GRANT B4, for Sheriff, but remember them for sho' when they run for election again and toss them into the garbage can of history, the one reserved for traitorous Uncle Toms.

-Amiri Baraka

Tues JUNE 4, 1991
Vote RALPH T. GRANT
S H E R I F F

B-4
Your Self, For A Change!

Reduced reproduction of 8 1/2 x 11" campaign leaflet

Baraka is one of the few public figures to have had the courage to come out for the decriminalization of drugs.) 2. The peace treaty that was being signed in Angola was not between black guerrillas and the Portuguese (they gave up their colonialism in Angola after the Portuguese revolution of 1974), but rather between the Marxist government of Angola and the infamous Jonas Savimbi's UNITA forces. This is something which the author was well aware of, but the reason he erroneously refers to the peace treaty as bringing an end to Portuguese colonialism is: 3. The leading candidate opposing Grant was Armando Fontoura, who just happens to be a Portuguese-American.

In the late eighties, Baraka began to make common-sense political statements that gave hope that maybe he had reached a newfound political maturity, statements like "Pete Rodino was a progressive guy," and his comments on a New Jersey Network public-affairs show to the effect that one of the mistakes of some people on the left had been a reliance on foreign models, that he now realized the struggle in America would have to be rooted in the culture. But, alas, the degree to which he remains mired in delusion and dogmatism can be seen in his writings in *Unity & Struggle*, the newsletter he revived in December of 1990. This mind-numbingly dogmatic, in-group affair is filled with obscure, sectarian arguments aimed at "the advanced." To take just one example of its often preposterous attempts to alloy communism and popular culture, one of Baraka's articles interprets Public Enemy's "Party for the Right to Fight" as a call for a united front for the '92 elections, going on to say, "We feel the forces that can actually put something like this together, [sic] will indeed be the 'advanced' forces necessary to create a communist vanguard party as well."¹⁴ He follows that up with "sectarianism must be opposed." There is even an article touting the "glorious" history of the Stalinist years in the Soviet Union which portrays Stalin as an "indomitable revolutionary" and which explains the collapse of the Soviet system as being "rooted in the decline of the political line" of the Communist Party.¹⁵ Elsewhere, he returns to more familiar themes, accusing Jesse Jackson of submission to imperialist and white supremacist forces because of his fight in the Democratic Party. He even uses "submission" to describe the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela, writing that the decision to cease armed struggle is a "betrayal!"¹⁶ It turns out that all of us who honored Mandela when he made his first visit to America were being duped. That the reason the ANC dropped armed struggle was a "quid pro quo. That is, that was the deal the Boers and their American relatives made with the ANC as the fundamental condition for the visit."¹⁷

Further evidence of where Baraka is these days can be found in his recent speeches. His stock speech in 1992, which I heard twice (one delivered in the spring at Jersey City State College and the other at the Newark Public Library in June), was even more demagogic than his writings. His opening line was, "All hail the L.A. freedom fighters." No mention was made of whether he considers the "L.A. 4" to be among them. In these speeches he claimed that black people have "no self-determination," and he rejected "all attempts to characterize us as U.S. citizens," even maintaining that "to say America is a democracy is to insult all people of color." He called for "a plebiscite to determine our relationship to America" and for a convention to discuss issues such as "regional separation and integration." His oratorical technique leaned heavily on emotionalism, as in, "We've never been able to express our opinions" [in America]. His lack of reasoned argument allowed him to characterize Clarence Thomas not just as a Bush-league replacement for Mr. Marshall, but as a "Nazi," whose real goal is to commit "genocide" against black people. At times, he seemed on the verge of saying something lucid, as in his indentionification of the Americas as the real West, noting its characteristic "complexity and search for humanity." But then he would fall back into the lunacy of asserting that the Greek gods were the "Vanilla Ice of Ethiopian originals." I keep waiting for Baraka to regain his mid-'60s insight that black Americans are indeed the quintessential Americans, but he seems too caught up in blind passion to really come to terms with what that means. For if there is one thing that black Americans believe in it is democracy, the soul of which this terribly angry man seems incapable of living up to. As is painfully evident in his advice to young people that if they see someone with a Confederate flag, "it's alright to kill 'em, stab 'em, pour gasoline on 'em and burn 'em."

Notes

1. "Crow Jane the Crook," *The Dead Lecturer*, collected in *Three Books by Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)* (New York: Grove Press, 1975), 52.
2. *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965*, (New York: Random House, 1971), 80.
3. "Black Art," *Black Magic Poetry, 1961-1967*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), 117.
4. "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS," *The Dead Lecturer*, collected in *Three Books by Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)* (New York: Grove Press, 1975), 63.

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5. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), 4.
6. "Malcolm as Ideology," *Malcolm X In Our Own Image*, Joe Wood ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 32.
7. Ibid.
8. *The Dutchman*, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1964), 35.
9. See Ron Simmons, "Some thoughts on the challenges facing black gay intellectuals," in *Brother to Brother*, Essex Hemphill ed., (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1991), 211-228.
10. *Home: Social Essays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 216.
11. "New York Is Everywhere Big," from *Hard Facts*, as read on the album *Totally Corrupt*, [Giorno Poetry Systems: LP (GPS 008-009), 1976]
12. "Malcolm as Ideology," 20.
13. Ibid.
14. *Unity & Struggle*, Vol. 2 No. 1, January 1991 (Newark), 7.
15. *Unity & Struggle*, Vol. 2 No. 1, January 1991, (Newark), 4.
16. *Unity & Struggle*, Vol. 1 No. 1, December 1990, (Newark), 2.
17. *Unity & Struggle*, Vol. 2 No. 2, March 1991, (Newark), 1.

Oral History

Preface

Club music as a form is rooted in disco, but it came into its own in the '80s as underground black dance music after disco's commercial peak. It may seem strange that disco's elegant and humane groove would take hold in a hard-boiled city like Newark, but there can be little doubt that club was by far the most popular art form in Newark during the 1980s. In Newark, when young people refer to "the classics," they are referring to the repertory of classic disco records at the core of the club aesthetic. We call club an "aesthetic" because it represents a philosophy, an approach to partying in which the club takes on the character of a sanctuary. Think of it as a sanctified version of the house party, a life-affirming context for the celebration of style. The most interesting cultural story of Newark during the '80s is how the club aesthetic took root here and made the city famous as a quality standard of underground dance music during the decade. How that happened is the focus of this oral history section.

For those who are unfamiliar with club music, we can sketch a historical outline of how the music evolved. There is a straight line from disco to club—some club artists will tell you that club, and its major variant, house, *are* disco. The particular sound that developed in Newark is heavily indebted to the classic Philadelphia International and Salsoul records of the '70s. Kelton Cooper maintains that Newark club is actually an update of the Philly International sound, with danceable drumbeats added to it. Club is certainly a continuation of disco's flow motion and its signature kick-drum/ride-cymbal rhythm patterns. But it was the club DJs, with their selection of music, who began to develop club as a form. This is where we can begin to understand how Newark became a

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center for the development of club, because of the presence of Club Zanzibar. This is where Al Murphy comes into the picture, since he already had a highly developed sense of the club aesthetic and was able to imagine Zanzibar as a standard for what club could be. Al also had the vision to bring in disco's genius of electronics, Richard Long, to construct the sonic environment of the club. This insured that Zanzibar would go down as one of the two key sites in the evolution of club, right alongside another Long creation, the Paradise Garage, which is generally recognized as the classic club. Furthermore, Al brought in the greatest DJs in the world—Dave Morales, Francois Kervorkian, Tee Scott, Larry Levan, and later, Tony Humphries—as the Zanzibar's regular DJs, thus insuring that Zanzibar would become a standard club.

But there was one important factor that made Zanzibar unique and that was that unlike the Garage and most of the other key clubs, which were private gay clubs and remained part of a subculture, Zanzibar was a public space and therefore was open to the full spectrum of musical genius in the culture at large. This is one major reason why Zanzibar, after the standard had been laid down for several years, became the site of an original music scene and the springboard for some of club's greatest records in the second half of the '80s.

The oral history works backward in time, starting with Kevin Hedge's coming-of-age story. Born in 1966, Kevin was a founding member of Blaze, Newark club's greatest group, and he tells the story from the perspective of the people who grew up in Newark with Zanzibar as the primary cultural institution. Ace Mungin, who was born in 1956, tells the story of how club germinated in the late '70s and early '80s in black gay discos, and how the music evolved when DJs, who no longer had new records to keep the spirit of the music alive, started making their own music. There is also a conversation with club veterans Kelton Cooper and Dave Slade, who help flesh out the defining characteristics of the music, how it evolved in Newark, and its relation to club music in general.

Finally, Shelton Hayes, the long-time manager of Zanzibar, tells the inside story of how Zanzibar was created and how it evolved. Shelton, who was born in 1953, paints an unforgettable portrait of Al Murphy and his concept of club as an art form. Shelton reaches back to club's earliest roots in Newark by recalling Al's first club, Le Joc, which ran from June of '74 to December of '75, and which represented the club aesthetic in its purest form. It is one of the most beautiful stories ever told about culture in the City of Newark.

Selected Discography of Club Music

The Classics (1974–1986)

- Love Is The Message*, MFSB (Philly International, 1974)
- What Can I Do For You?*, Labelle (Epic, 1974)
- Free Man*, South Shore Commission (Coast to Coast, 1975)
- You've Got Me Running*, Lenny Williams (ABC, 1976)
- Love Hangover*, Diana Ross (Motown, 1976)
- My Love Is Free*, Double Exposure (Salsoul, 1976)
- Hit & Run / Love Sensation*, Loleatta Holloway (Salsoul/Goldmind, 1976/'80)
- Running Away*, Roy Ayers Ubiquity (Polydor, 1977)
- Touch & Go*, Ecstasy, Passion and Pain (Roulette, 1977)
- Doctor Love / Let No Man Put Asunder*, First Choice (Salsoul/Goldmind, 1977)
- Why Leave Us Alone*, Five Special (Electra, 1979)
- Relight My Fire*, Dan Hartman (Blue Sky, 1979)
- All My Love*, Lax (Prelude, 1980)
- Just Us*, Two Tons O' Fun (Fantasy, 1980)
- It's All Over My Face*, Loose Joints (West End, 1980)
- Ain't Nobody / Clouds / I'm Every Woman*, Chaka Khan (Warner Bros., '80-'83)
- Ain't No Mountain High Enough*, Inner Life (Salsoul, 1981)
- I Want To Thank You*, Alicia Myers (MCA, 1981)
- Funky Sensation*, Gwen McCrae (Atlantic, 1981)
- Over 'n' Over*, Sylvester (Megatone, 1982)
- You're The One For Me*, D-Train (Prelude, 1982)
- The Music's Got Me / Somehow, Some Way*, Visual (Prelude, 1983/'84)
- Don't Make Me Wait / Life Is Something Special*, Peach Boys (Island, 1983)
- Music Is The Answer / Trapped*, Colonel Abrams (MCA, 1984/'85)
- Nobody's Business*, Billie [T. Regisford & B. Jarvis] (Fleetwood, 1986)

Classics by Newark Artists (1986–1992)

- Ma Foom Bey*, Culture Vibe [Tony Humphries edit] (Easy Street, 1986)
- If You Should Need A Friend / Can't Win For Losin'*, Blaze (Quark, 1987/'88)
- I Need Somebody*, Keicha Jenkins (Profile, 1987)
- Jack the Groove / Break 4 Love*, Raze (Grove St., 1987)
- Reachin'*, Phase II (Movin', 1988)
- Make My Body Rock*, Jomanda (New York Underground, 1989)
- Pump Up The Music*, Gordon Nelson Jr. (Spin City, 1989)
- Someday / Forever*, Ce Ce Rogers (Atlantic, 1989)
- Let The Rain Come Down / Can't Treat Me This Way*, Intense (AceBeat, 1989)
- Always There*, Charvoni (Capitol, 1989)
- Wake Up*, On Top (Republic, 1989)
- She's Crazy*, Kamar (Movin', 1991)
- Call Him Up*, Voices of Sixth Ave. (AceBeat, 1992)

Albums

- Paradise Regained; The Deepest Garage Sound of New York*, Various artists, produced by Blaze (Republic, 1989)
- 25 Years Later*, Blaze (Motown, 1990)



Kevin Hedge

Growing Up with Club in Newark

I gotta start with my mother. She moved to Newark in 1960. My mother was from Lebanon, Virginia. Little small town in Virginia. My father was from Jacksonville, Florida. She was working downtown and livin on Pioneer Street in Newark, right off of Elizabeth Avenue, by Shabazz [High School]. My mother was twenty-three and my father was twenty-eight when I was born. I grew up with my mother. My father, ya know, it's the classic thing, he kinda cut out. He split and went to Boston to finish his education. My mother had this baby she wasn't expectin. My father's aunt Earnestine told my mother, "Well, why don't you move in with me so I can watch the baby while you go to work?" So my mother got it together and kinda cooled out and moved in with my aunt.

My aunt, now, she was the partying type, and that's where I get to my interest in music. She was always a sweet lady, always. Always had her hand open to help somebody. And I'm not just sayin this cause she's deceased. I mean, I remember she had three or four people livin in the house, in the apartment. I never lived in a house. The living room had somebody in it, the dining room had somebody. Ya know, she always had these people livin in the house with us. And I mean it was all types a people, too. I remember at one point there was this woman, Flo Kessler. She was a Jewish lady. I was very young, so I didn't know what Jewish was. I didn't realize the difference between black and white at that time. So we had Jewish people livin with us, we had a West Indian lady livin with us at the same time. We had another woman, Marie, who was, I'll be honest with you, Marie was gay. I never knew this until now. So my aunt always had a wide cross-section of people that she was involved with. Always had her hand open and takin somebody in and helpin them

out for the time they could be helped out.

My aunt was a hairdresser, but when I was born I was like her little grandson, so she wanted to take off work and keep me during the week while my mother went to work. So during the week she was always playin music. Like King Curtis. She used to go out with King Curtis, cause he used to come to Newark all the time. Always playin these records, and this was when I was about three. She was in love with the Supremes. Always played Aretha Franklin. Donny Hathaway, that was her man. Donny Hathaway, forget it. Played him to death. Always had, like, Elvis Presley, Jackie Gleason, Dean Martin, Perry Como. So she always had a wide range of music, and played all of it. She had a record of Charlie Parker, right, and Coltrane, and she used to play them when she was sad. I could always tell when she was havin a hard day. When she would come in and play some Coltrane, or Charlie Parker. I remember "My Favorite Things," by John Coltrane. I remember that for years. I always had a fascination with the recordplayer and dancin and havin parties. Somehow it always seemed I was meant to be a DJ, cause even then, I was in charge of playin the records. She taught me how to play the little recordplayer and that was my job, to play the different records.

We used to have these rent parties. Cause like my aunt never really worked, so we never had any real money, cause my mother, she was a secretary, wasn't no real money. My aunt had left her husband by then, and between the three of them—my aunt Tina and her sister Margaret and my mother—they always managed to make ends meet. And I always had everything I could think about wantin (I'm an only child). When my aunt and them used to have a party, it was bring-your-own-bottle and they would provide the food. You'd come in and pay two dollars. I used to collect the money. They used to get that money to pay the rent.

We lived on Elizabeth Avenue for a couple of years. When I was growing up, the Pioneer Street apartment was too small, so we moved from there to the Elizabeth Avenue apartment. After that, my aunt started, I ain't gonna lie, she started dealin numbers. Cause at that time it was a big thing. She was working in a beauty parlor, so it was easy business. By dealin numbers she was able to get more money, and she moved us to the Weequahic section, which was all Jewish. That was unheard of. We was like the second black family to move to Weequahic Avenue, where I did most of my growing up. I lived on Weequahic Avenue for about twenty-two years. I still live on Weequahic Avenue. I'm happy I did get the opportunity to move to that area, because if I hadda been made to stay in the environment that Johnson Avenue, Pio-

neer Street, Milford Avenue, what that area eventually turned into, I know definitely I'd have been a much different person. Weequahic Avenue was like a play street when I was growing up. I mean, kids were poor, but we never knew we were poor. Because it was always trees and grass and you could ride your bike. I never thought much about black and white. Most of the time, the way black people raised their children, especially in those times, was that everybody was just everybody. White and black didn't make a difference to them. It was the same, you know? Even now, it's like I think of it as black and white, because I understand the political side of things. But humanistically, it's just people. That's the way I was raised.

Music had always been a part of my life. My favorite group of all time—I had to be about eight when this record came out—was Earth, Wind & Fire. The *All 'N'* *All* album. Favorite album of all time. When I was in grammar school, from the time I was in the fifth grade until the time I was in the eighth grade, there was a store on Lyons Avenue named Buddy's Hilltop Records. He was a little guy, an older guy. He just died about two years ago. My mother used to give me an allowance to go to school, maybe a dollar-fifty a day. I used to walk to school, Maple Avenue (and Maple Avenue-Annex, and Maple-Lyons). It was right across the street from what was then Pathmark. Walkin back and forth from school every day—I never realized this until you just makin me talk about it. I had an interest in music all this time. I used to buy a record a day. Every day. When I was in the fifth grade, it was like, eighty-nine cents for a 45 [record]. By the time I got to the eighth grade, it was a dollar and a quarter. I'll never forget that. Every day I used to go in to Buddy's and get a record. I never ate lunch. I'd save my money and buy one 45. And this stuff was comin out, like Rick James ("Freaky Deaky"), Roy Ayers, Quincy Jones ("Stuff Like That"). Cameo's first record. But I never bought a 45 by Earth, Wind & Fire. I always saved to buy an album by EW&F.

EW&F was always my favorite. I think the thing with EW&F that hooked me was that it was something that I identified with. All my life, nobody ever told me that I was from Africa, but I always watched the Tarzan movies and the different wildlife programs—"Wild Kingdom." Somehow, I always had this strange feeling that I belonged out there with them animals, or with the natives in the Tarzan movies. And I always had the feeling, even when I was young, even when I saw "Born Free," even then, I always had this thing like, I don't know what it was. I always had this song in my mind, from the time I was young, and I'm writ-

ing it now for our new album. It's called "Africa Is Calling." I don't know where it came from, but I always see that tree, those weeping trees in Africa. You know, like the wind done blown 'em and they grow like the wind blow. I always had that, seeing lions in this thing. So I think with EW&F it was always something I was identifyin with. See, cause like he was almost an Egyptologist, Maurice White. He was a Mason, but he was into more of the Egyptologist side of Masonry than he was into the Islamic or Christianity side of it. So with those images, even though I didn't identify it with being in Africa, I identified it as having something more to do with it than just being music. Even his songs—he's got this one, "Keep Your Head to the Sky." He's got another one called "Caribou." It's just music and it's just so bad. And I listened to that and I think about when I was younger and I still get the same feeling. When I listen to "Caribou," I can sit down and I'm sitting on the plains, man, with my lion skin on and I'm just chillin out. I can see the Caribou and the different animals and the wildebeest runnin across the plains.

I grew up in an area with a lot of older children, and when I was graduatin grammar school, they were graduatin high school and they was all gettin ready to go to Zanzibar. So one night, I'll never forget, I was supposed to be around the corner at a party that Terrence Cooper was throwin. But some of the older guys said they was goin to Zanzibar, and I snuck with them to Zanzibar. Got on the bus and went down there. Merlin Bobb was the doorman. This is '79. I was just graduatin grammar school. At the door at Zanzibar—I was way too young, so they made me put on a hat. It was warm out, I'll never forget this. I had a hat on and a turtleneck that they made me put on, so my neck would seem higher. And Ricky gave me a pair of shoes to make me look taller, make me look of age. And they all pushed me in between them, and Merlin was preoccupied with somethin else. I didn't know that Merlin was gonna stop me, but now I realize that that's what wouldda happened. I slid my money through the slot and the guy slid me a ticket back and I went around the thing before Merlin could get turned back around. By the time he turned around I was already in. So the guys checked me, ya know the guys at Zanzibar, they didn't care. Al Murphy and them, they didn't want those young'uns in there, but the guards, as long as Merlin let you in, it was cool.

They patted me down and I went upstairs and I got up there and I couldn't believe the music. I couldn't believe how loud it was. I couldn't believe the lights. And I sat down, man, I just sat in this chair. I was sittin across from the DJ booth and Larry Levan was the DJ that night. It was

on a Wednesday night and he was the DJ and I was sittin down and I was just watchin this guy all night. I couldn't see nothin but his head. But I watched his movements, watched when he would turn around. Listened to the records he was playing. What's this record? Ya know, like "Doctor Love" and them. I didn't know what that was. And those were big records at that time. "It's Not Over" ["Let No Man Put Asunder"] and all those records. I didn't know what none of that was. It was freakin me out. "Love Sensation," all that Geraldine Hunt, Esther Williams, freakin me out. This guy, what is he doin? The people dancin, everybody in the music and then he'd turn the bass off.

I went to high school that year. I remember that so good, because on Thursday after Labor Day Newark's schools go back in session. That was the Wednesday before the day to go back to school. We stayed there until I got me into trouble. They kept me there until six-thirty that morning. My mother knew I lied. I left from Zanzibar and went straight to the school, which was Science High. That was right down the street. Registered and everything. So when I got home, my mother was like, "Where you been? I been looking for you!" So I got up and told her I had left early for school and this, that and the other. Man, I was on punishment until Christmas. During this time there was this group called Mark IV Disco. They was goin around. They was a bunch of young guys, but they was older than me and they were doing parties for high school kids at that time. They were good. So I was always tryin to get my way to them. Not to dance—never danced, just watch the DJ.

So finally, it was New Year's Eve and my friends up the street always used to have a party and my mother knew their family, so it was cool for me to stay all night. But this time it was some older people there and they was like, "We goin to the Garage." Hey man, you know, I'd been in Zanzibar and you'd hear so much about the Garage [in Manhattan]. This was four months after I had gone to Zanzibar. I was like, let me go to the Garage. Let me go, let me go. So now I'm sneakin out. I knew I could sneak away from this lady, who was like my aunt. She wasn't gonna watch me, cause everybody was kind of drunk, kids was runnin, kids was gettin drunk. So I said let me go and check out these people. They was willing to take me, and since they was willing to take me, I jumped in the car with 'em.

We went to the Garage. The Garage was wild. There was a big line and I was like, wait a minute, it wasn't like this at Zanzibar. It was a little line at Zanzibar, you could go right in. We standin in line and we standin in line and just so much is goin on, man. People out there sellin drugs. I

never been around that many gays in my life, but it didn't scare me. Cause of the upbringing. Gay people, gay people. So we out there and cars goin by and it's New Year's Eve. It's like the biggest night. I went in the Garage. Before they made the Crystal Room, right there, they used to have bleachers, and that was right there where you could see Larry. And I looked up and said, oh, man, that's Larry Levan. No lie, man, I sat in the Garage for eight hours in that same spot. And I watched every move Larry made. I knew when he slid the light panel over, when he licked his lips, what he was takin out of his eye, who he was talkin to, his gestures when he was talkin to 'em, when he turned his record thing around. I knew all a that. It was just freakin me out. I just remember thinkin I wanted to be like Larry Levan. Just to have that much control over that many people. Never was about dancin to me. Even now, at the Shelter [a club in Manhattan], you see people doin this wild dancin. That's not even important to me. It's what Timmy [Regisford] does that fascinates me. You know, I'll go the Shelter and sit there. I can go in the booth and watch Timmy. I can play music if I want to. It was always what I wanted to be.

Larry, at that time, our culture—I always had this thought that Larry had on the African hat, and it was fascinatin to me. It was cultural. He was fascinatin. What he was doin and the people screamin and callin his name. I guess he was a star and everybody wants to be a star. And I identified with that. [Blue: "There's a lot of deep strains that people don't ordinarily see in the whole disco thing. It's like an African ceremony, if you want to look at it that way."] Right! I guess that's what it was. It was like what was happenin in my house. When they used to have parties and all that and how people used to say, "Oh, you play the right records! Could you play this record?" And I used to love to play the records. It was like all a that and it was family and it was fun and everybody was just hangin, you know. So anyway, 'member "Stretch It Out"? Larry played that record about eight times. I ain't never forgot that, man. He kept playin that record, man. He'd play a little bit of it and then play somethin else. Then he'd put that back on like two records later and I was like, dang, this is amazing. You can do that? You can really do that? Yeah.

After DJ'n for a year, I started playin at parties and I got popular. But what happened, most importantly, was that I had found a record shop that Larry Levan shopped at. VinylMania, in New York. That was before Movin' [Records]. Way before Movin' even thought about sellin records like they do now. I started goin to VinylMania. When I was in

high school my mother gave me a little more. She'd give me like five dollars a day cause I had to take the bus and buy lunch and everything. But I never ate. I used to walk home from Science High. Walked home from Science High just to save money to buy records. Friday, cut school, get in the city, get to the Village, never been in the city, like just to hang out in the city. Took the PATH over, man, into the Village and went straight to VinylMania. They was in that little store then. The real little one, the first one. Got in there and it was crowded. It was so many people, man, you couldn't move. Everybody was buyin records. Records was hangin up for fifty dollars. It was everything Larry was supposed to be playing. And Manny was behind the thing and Manny was the king. And anything Manny would play, I was buyin.

The way it worked out was to my advantage. Cause I had a lot more records than other DJs. I had "Touch & Go," the original. "Free Man," the original. Lenny Williams. All this stuff that I didn't realize the importance of. But people who hung out at these night clubs knew that if you was playin them records you was the man. But I didn't know. I used to just play 'em. Really, the only DJs I was hearing was on the radio. Tony Humphries was on the radio. Larry was doin his guest spots. Tee Scott was doin his guest spots on BLS on Sunday afternoons. Shep Pettibone was on the radio. In fact, Shep Pettibone was first. Then he let Tony Humphries come on. Then, what really changed my whole perspective of DJ'n was, I got the opportunity to go back to the clubs a couple a times. I went to the Garage, but what really changed me and made me what I became today was Timmy Regisford and Boyd Jarvis. They were the first New Jacks, so to speak. During that time, Larry had just started his remixin quest. And I used to see his name on records, remixed by Larry Levan. But I was never as big as Larry Levan, so I wouldn't never figure out what this remixin stuff was. But when Timmy and them came out with it, that kind of said, "I can do it, too." Timmy Regisford and Boyd Jarvis, who the hell are they? Timmy Regisford and Boyd Jarvis came out makin their own music. Which was a concept that Larry had started, but I couldn't grasp it fully, because Larry was such a star to me. It was out of our reach. But Timmy, when he came on BLS, he was a star, but he wasn't a star like Larry was. So it was reachable. And I started gettin interested in it.

After I graduated high school, I went to DeVry [business school, in Woodbridge]. I was eighteen and I wanted to be a DJ. See, goin to DeVry was like Corporate America. And that didn't have nothin to do with the Garage or Zanzibar. I was goin to the Garage and Zanzibar and the Pal-

ladium on the weekends. My mother had left to go down South to take care of her mother and I was goin to all those places. What messed me up was that I was gettin confused between the two worlds. It was like I was goin to those places and havin a great time on the weekend and bein around, like you said, a cultural experience, and then going to DeVry, and that's like goin to work for ITT or somethin. It was ninety-five percent white, nothin relating to any black culture. Plus, I was takin the bus, hour-and-a-half ride out there, hour-and-a-half ride back. All of 'his work. It was just not me. It wasn't what I was lookin for. So eventually I dropped out of school. How I really got to drop out was, my mother hadn't worked in three months, so we didn't have enough money to keep makin payments to DeVry and the bills had built up to like twelve hundred dollars. There was no way she was gonna come up with that kinda money. So I said, ma, just forget it, it's not even worth it. So I just quit.

I didn't have nothin to do. I was home and I just walked up to East Orange. Somebody told me about a record shop that was openin in East Orange, Movin' Records, and this lady was sellin records like VinylMania. So I walked up there and I always knew Manny and them, always liked his job, because he was around records and DJ'n and all that. I walked up to Abbie, walked in her store and I said I want to work for you. She looked at me like I was crazy. She was still a skate store, predominantly, but she was gettin into records. And I said, "I'll do it for free. I just wanna work for you." And Abbie didn't really want to turn me down, she wanted to say no, but she didn't want to turn me down. I was talkin free, ya know, hey. So she said, "Okay, come back on Friday." Just to see if I was really gonna come back. I showed up Friday, earlier than the time she told me. I was there before she opened the store. She came in and said, "Wait a minute," cause she didn't know me. So I just hung out in the store. Waited, waited, waited, like for four hours. Then finally, she said, "Well, come back, let me show you how to do this. Let me show you how to do that." Till eventually I worked my way into the store, to the system up there. And Abbie knew a lot of people in New York. That was also intriguing. She knew Timmy. Abbie always can get to know somebody. She knew Timmy and them. Very intriguing. I wanted to know them, and I was like, you know Timmy Regisford? You know Larry Levan? You know Manny and Judy, personally? Manny and Judy, they knew me from just bein a customer. They knew me as Kevin and I was cool with them, but I was basically a customer. When they saw me with Abbie it was a whole nother thing. I was in their circle now. But Abbie never paid me. I never had money durin this time. My mother thought

I was stupid. I used to walk from Abbie's store to where Beth Israel Hospital is. I live right around the corner from Beth Israel. Every day, to be in that store. That's how committed I was to bein in this business. I wanted to be a DJ. I didn't care how long it took. I worked for Abbie for about a year and a half. What happened was, Abbie had a friend and me and her friend had a fallin out. When me and her friend had a fallin out, it was time for me to leave.

But before I had left, I had made contact with this gentleman, Carlton. He used to work at Abbie's. Heavy-set, he got a beard. Carlton had put me in touch with this dude named Meekal Muhammed, who owned a four-track studio. By then I had wanted to make my own music, but I didn't know how to play no instruments. I had a friend named Chris Herbert who could sing a little bit. But we needed a musician. So Carlton hooked me up with the studio. So I went over to Meekal and had a talk with him and I was hopin to get Meekal to be able to play for me. But he didn't want to do that. He had another agenda on his mind. So we left, all discouraged. We couldn't make our music. Then Chris came up with the bright idea, why don't we get this guy who plays in my church, the organ in my church, to come down and try to put some stuff together for us. The Church of God in Christ, on William Street in Orange. I said, "All right, Bet. Let's do it." And that happened to be Josh [Milan]. Josh was sixteen at the time (1984). I said, "Well, bring him over to my house." I had all my DJ equipment set up. I had a reel-to-reel that my father bought me and a cassette deck. I had a "Mix Your Own Stars" beat record. Josh came over and man, he sat down and he played and it was phenomenal. I never seen people that could play the piano that good. You know, he was playin nothin that I was interested in, but everything sounded good, cause he knew what he was doin. He was just born to do that. We came up with this record called "Electric Dance." It was a bass line that I had hummed to Josh, club-style. He played it and then every other day, him and Chris and I would get together and come up with a new track.

Eventually, I went back to Meekal's and he told me how much it cost to rent his studio out and I wanted to come in his studio to record somethin. I had already left Abbie. I didn't have no job. So what I did was, I knew Abbie bought old records. So I started to sell her some of my old records. To get the money to go in the studio. Which was hurtin me, cause that was my collection. So I'd go into the studio, it was on Main Street in East Orange. Finally, Meekal asked me, "Hey, man, you're a young dude. You wanna learn how to engineer?" I said, "Well, yeah, I

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had some training." That was all he needed to hear. He showed me how to work his equipment and made me an engineer. So in exchange for my work, he was givin me free studio time. Bam. What better hook-up to get than this? I didn't know I wasn't gettin paid. I used to walk home from Main Street in East Orange, where New Jersey Motor Vehicle is. Every day. Again. It was the same ole thing. Every day. But I used to walk from there at like three o'clock in the morning. In the summer, I was ridin my bike. It was crazy, but we got to make tracks. That was the most important thing. I could book every day of the week, but I'd leave Sunday open. After church, me and Josh and Chris would get together and write our own music.

So we was doin that and I was workin at Meekal's, toilin, man. This was some real engineerin. I was doin like five sessions a day. Demo stuff. He was doin his own stuff and then he was havin clients payin to rent the studio out. I was doin most of those sessions. We was doin that every day, every day, every day. I was workin and workin and workin. Gainin studio time. Not getting paid. And livin off my mother's food. So finally, what happened was, Meekal got a little jealous, because people were startin to request me as an engineer over him. This guy named Dave Conely, from Surface, he asked me to come to his house. He had an eight-track. I said, oh, an eight-track, I'm movin up. I went to his house and started to work for him. But in the meantime, I was still always working for Meekal. That was my main guy. I started learnin more about production. I learned a lot from Meek. Finally, I realized you had to have all these different elements to make a record. Now that was when Chicago was really startin to take over. They was makin all these track records. In fact, they had been out for a year. Just makin no-vocals tracks. But I had grew up in that era of the Garage and all that singin, that's when I first started goin. So those records had the biggest impression on me. Those singin records. We came up with this track. I said, "That's the bass line I want." Josh played it. I came up with a drum beat on the Linn drum and we thought it was great. So then I said, "What do I want? What is the main thing about my life?" I wanted to have a cultural flavor. Josh said, "What you mean?" I said, "Put some steel drums in it." So he came up with this blink, blink, blink. We did it and I thought it was smokin. I said, all right. Now we gonna do a steel drum solo. So we did all that. We didn't have no lyrics to the song. So me and Chris went home and thought about it and then we said, "Whatcha gonna do for love?" That's how we wrote that. That was the first song.

Club music—let me put it this way: when New York went to rap, Jer-



Blaze

sey stayed with club. Because of Zanzibar. See, in New York, kids was seein rappers out in their own neighborhoods become rappers. Professional rap artists. Jersey never had that. We never had no rappers before a certain time. You know, in the history of rap. So we had no reason to identify with rap as strongly as New York did. So the only thing we really had to do, as far as goin out, was Club Zanzibar. So I see Club Zanzibar, Tee Scott, Larry Patterson, even Tony Humphries, those guys, as bein the reason Jersey stayed with club. Now, I'm not gonna say club developed in Jersey, because I believe that if it had not been for Larry Levan, we would not even be sittin here havin this conversation. He was the true innovator of keeping that idea, that aspect, that feelin about the music, alive. Larry Levan. He definitely was. "Touch & Go" was 1977. The first time I heard it was like, 1981. Ya know what I'm sayin? At the Garage. For a man to keep that record that long, that's amazing. To know that this is a great record. And keep playin it. So it was him. Even though the first club I went to was Zanzibar, I realize that it wasn't until 1979 that Zanzibar had really opened. Right before I graduated. It was still kind of new then. That's when they had the spotlights and the tigers and stuff out there. It had just really opened. So that was really new to me. As I grew older, I realize where Al Murphy got the idea from—the Garage. The atmosphere, the partyin atmosphere, is what he kept alive.

Really, the atmosphere didn't really dawn upon me [at the Garage] until after the music, after I grew up. That's when I really started noticin that this place was about more than Larry Levan, the heart of the Garage. I played the tenth anniversary party [of the Garage], when they had Blaze perform. That was our first record, "Whatcha Gonna Do?" That was their last anniversary party, January 10, 1987. Everybody was tellin us, Larry's pumpin your record. See, that was big for me, cause here's my idol likin somethin that I did. If it had not been for him, I probably wouldn't even been doin that. Man, he played the record so much before we even got on stage. Then when we got on stage, the record started and the crowd got off and then the way they just—man, the response. And there was like two thousand people in the Garage that night. I didn't realize how big our record was in the Garage. There was just people all over. And then when we got off the stage, how people were just so nice, and that's when I realized it was about more than just music and dancin. It was really the atmosphere.

I went to the Docks [in Newark] a couple a times. It wasn't no big deal to me. Hippy was a good DJ, but as a DJ, you was cocky. Ya know, nobody better than you. It was this one guy who really had a profound

effect on my DJ'n and he was the guy who worked with me at Club Hardware. His name was Shakim. He used to be a part of Mark IV, but he left Mark IV to work with me. He just liked the way I was playin music. If anybody coulda been Larry Levan, he coulda been Larry Levan. This guy was talented. He had so much knowledge of music. What record to play. How to play it. Programming. You know, programming for a night. See, that's what DJs is missin. You know, I go to this thing with Abbie down here, she has this club, Scandals. And I listen to these young DJs comin up. And if I was still a DJ, if I was really still into that, I think I would be far ahead of them, because their programming is so wack. I mean, Shakim's programming was so—what I mean by programming is the time of the night he would play a record, after which record he would play it and how he would build you up to that record. And how he would bring you down, like Levan. He lost that in his later years, Levan did. I guess, cause he didn't feel like he had to keep workin as hard. But the programmin, that's the part that really impressed me the most. In the later years of my DJ'n, instead of concentratin on the technical aspects of the mix, the programming aspect of it was what I got into, and that's what really carried over into my record production. How you develop a record. Most of our records, in the beginning, start out kinda calm and then by the end it's like, wow! You know, and it's always been like that. It's always been like a steady rise. And even in the DJ'n, it's the programming. That's what these guys today miss. I listen to all these guys, man. It's *when* you play a record. Not what you mix it with. When and how you play it. That's what makes the crowd go crazy.

Larry was programming records at the time you was least expectin it. And then when you was expectin it, he would maybe give you a little bit of it. He would set the mood for the night so nice by the records he was playin. He would build you up nicely, where you might hear a record that you like and you might jump out there and dance. Then a DJ'll mix another record in and you like that record and you dance, but physically your body can't continue to go like that but for about four records. If you're a hard dancer, you finished. If a DJ play a great record, you ain't gonna be able to dance. But Larry would play—he would keep it so that you could dance hard and enjoy it and keep dancin through the great records and never really realize, cause your spirit would take over. He would allow his spirit to come through the turntables, and his spirit would take over and you could feel it comin and your spirit would get into it. It would be like a ritual. You'd be tranced and you'd be dancin and you'd see the crowd and when I realized that, like I said, that's the

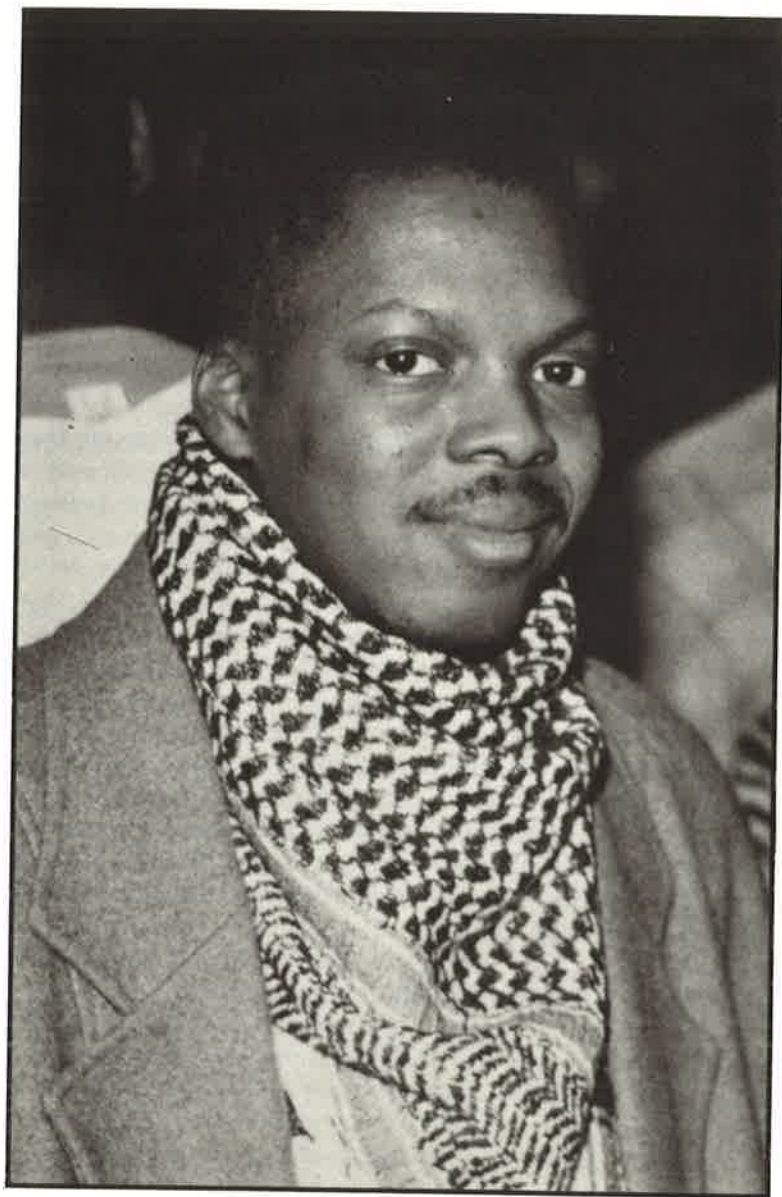
part that changed my life. The trance part of it. When he'd slow it down to give you a break, you wouldn't even realize that you needed a break. And then you get these guys flippin on the floor when he playin a slow record, because your energy level is just frenzied, and then after that he plays the song you been waitin for all night—it's like you just explode, because you can't dance no more. But you got to. That's programmin. Even today, man, me and Timmy Regisford have arguments. Cause some nights, Timmy will program a great show and then other nights he'll just want to bang, bang, bang all night. And that's not even it, man. Larry could play beats like 100 and 105 [beats per minute] all night, ya know, and you'd dance just as hard as if you was dancin to 120. But it was the programmin, it was the inflection of the record. And then sometimes it was just how he hit the crossover, a little bit, to make parts of the record jump out. Songs like "As." Stevie Wonder's "As." "I'll be lovin you / Always." Stevie plays an electric piano in there, but if you're not really listenin, then you ain't gonna hear it. But when Larry used to take the high-mids up and do the crossover, you could hear Stevie playin all this incredible stuff on his piano and my mind would just go, damn! Damn! And then Stevie's spirit is workin on you. Larry's spirit, Stevie's spirit. And then however many thousands of watts is pumpin at you. And then you in a trance, cause everybody else is and it's hot and sweatin and it's great. That's what we miss.

Both hip hop and club are forms of black expression born out of oppressed natures. Both of 'em are examples of freedom. Expressions of freedom. That's what both of these art forms do. The difference between club music and hip hop is that the culture of the club, like a Garage, like a Zanzibar, was one that was predominantly associated with disco. And then after disco, it was kept alive by a predominantly gay community. And seein as how it was kept alive by a predominantly gay community, what does America want to do with it? It don't want that culture to be the predominant culture of the society. So it kind of suppresses that music. So what happened was that when somebody said disco is dead, every other record that came out was a disco beat. House is just disco. Every record that came with a disco beat, radio never even looked at it.

Then you got these older guys, forty-, fifty-years-old, they don't want to have nothin to do with gay people. Ya know what I'm sayin? So the Garage was this gay thing. The only one who was daring enough to deal with the Garage in any fashion was Frankie Crocker. He was just an innovator during that time. And Larry happened to be a good friend of his. So I would say that the difference is the way we as a people chose to

deal with it, more or less. You got rappers now using Rochelle Fleming samples in their raps. You know, that's club music. How they find out about that? When they been listenin supposedly to this other stuff. I believe that the majority of our people that was in power to make things happen took the time to develop rap, number one. Because it wasn't associated with anything that was morally negative. Culturally negative is totally different. Morally negative is, if you morally negative, you don't have a chance in America. I believe it was because club music was so associated with gayness, being gay, that I think that somehow the older people dealin with radio, those type of people, just couldn't deal with that. It was this feelin like, ya know, you get straight people, even today, who call it the Gayrage. If you went to the Garage on Saturday, somethin must be wrong with you. Even now, when you go to the Shelter, you get people who say, "I don't wanna be around all them gays." Ya know, because of that. In hip hop, you don't have that stigma attached to it. So hip hop was able to grow. It was able to take on a more cultural aspect, as far as the identification process with the urban youth of America. The only way you usually get to club music is because you goin to a club. Cause they wasn't playin it on the radio. Really, all during the eighties, they really didn't play club music on the radio. Even now, man, there's no club records on the radio. None. When I came out with records, independents had a chance to get on the radio. Now, you can forget it.

I always said that I never made my club music about the street. Whenever I think of club music, I got to think about my inspiration, which is the club. And the atmosphere and situation of the club. So therefore, I'm making club music from the standpoint of being in the club. That's how it always gets associated. That's why I think, when you have songs like "Someday," that's like a club concept. It sends chills up your back. Ya know, "We'll live as one family / In sweet harmony." You can never have that on the street.



Ace Mungin

ACE MUNGIN

The Roots of Club in Newark

There was a club that was opening up downtown called Le Joc's and it was opened by Al Murphy. It was on Halsey Street, down the street from Hahne's. It was a really small club and it was supposed to be the elite people, you know. What I didn't know was that it was a gay club. This had to be around 1976. [Le Joc opened in June of '74 and closed in late '75.] Al Murphy was a model. He used to give fashion shows, he was like the person in this area for givin fashion shows. From all my experiences with bands and playin at different places and being a DJ and goin into different places, I felt like I was an authority on music and the way a club was put together, and I went in there and it was like no other place I had ever been to. At first, I was a little alienated by it, because I went in there and the DJ didn't play anything that was really familiar. I mean, he wasn't playing any Top 40, anything that was being played in other clubs. He was playing a lot of the Laws' stuff, Ronnie Laws, Eloise Laws, that type of stuff. "Free Man," Bohannon, a lot of the stuff that we call classics today. They was playing that stuff back then.

It was not being played in any other clubs. Even one or two of the other gay clubs I had went into, which were predominantly white. I had been to one or two other gay clubs and that whole thing was Frankie Valli, "Babyface," all of that Casablanca stuff. They were up at like 130 bpm [beats per minute]-type stuff, that disco thing. But the DJ at Le Joc's was very jazz-oriented, it wasn't way up there in the beats. I never was able to find out who he was [Larry Patterson]. Because Al Murphy came from the fashion end, everybody there wore high-fashion type of clothes. It was just different. It was like fashion, but fashion that I had never seen before. Even other clubs where people would dress up, it was a totally different thing. There was no alcohol. They had the great spread of fruits

and whatnot. It was like some stuff that I would see now, they were wearin it back then. They had spandex back then and you didn't see that, at that time. It was a hip, black, gay style. Mixed, men and women. When you would go, you'd see couples dancin together and it would be guys dancin together, girls dancin together, it was all three mixtures. You would have the straight couples dancin together, then you'd have the guys dancin together, and the girls dancin together. It was real friendly.

The whole thing was different. It was my first time experiencing people coming together and going to a club for dancing. It was like, straight up, we goin here to party, that's it. I never stayed all night. Usually, they would play up until a certain time, like three o'clock in the morning. And then they would stop the music and they would go into a slow thing. I used to go with this girl all the time and usually when they started playing the slow set we would leave. I think what would happen was that they would play the slow set and basically, those that were straight would leave. Those that were gay would stay. They would start up with the fast music, but it was like all gay by then. You know, "Let's send the straights home." Ya know, "We're gonna really get down." It was just totally different.

Al Murphy, that was his club, his creation. He seemed like he created what I see now, what is left now. To me, he's like the creator of it, as far as in this area is concerned. I would say, from what little I know, he probably got some of his ideas from New York. I don't know if the Garage was open at that time [it wasn't]. From what I understand, before the Garage opened, Al Murphy, the owners of the Garage, and maybe one or two other people, used to give parties all around. They used to give different parties. Because the way Al Murphy had that club set up was basically how the Garage was set up. That type of atmosphere, with the punch, no alcohol, you had this big, outlandish spread of fruit and whatnot. The people dressed very provocatively, you know, enticing.

Le Joc's stayed open for a while. Then he got into a club called the Docks. It was Butchy's. It was on Broad Street, near Broad and Market. Upstairs. It was very underground. It was a small club. And Al Murphy came in there after his club closed or he closed it and then he started promoting Docks. And when he promoted Docks, he gave it that feel. When he had Le Joc's, the DJ was playing good music, but I believe that he told them what to play. How he played was not as important as what he played. That whole atmosphere of the food and everything, the people that were there. He made sure that every night he had a certain type of

people there. As long as he had his certain little crowd there, anybody else was like gravy. So it was like, those people coming there set the stage and the atmosphere for how that club was supposed to be.

The Docks was the same kind of music. Hippy was playing there. It wasn't disco. I can only put it in terms of beats. The white clubs and the other clubs that would call themselves strictly disco, they would be into that 130-bpm-type a thing. It was very, very commercial sounding stuff. The black clubs, they would still be into, like, the Commodores, whatever you was hearin on (W)BLS at the time, they would play that stuff in a black club. But this club was a little bit of both and a lot more of what you didn't hear. Hippy was great. He was extremely creative. That's when I started seeing mixin with a reel-to-reel. He would play stuff and mix it in a reel-to-reel. The choice of music was just different. To me, there was creativity in that. He would play stuff that I, as a DJ, would never play. And people would go wild. Like some old B-52s' stuff, mixed in with some other stuff. He used to play a lot of imports, stuff that was comin in from Europe.

From that point, I hooked up with Bobby White. Bobby White was one of the top female impersonators around here. Bobby just died last year. Matter-of-fact, I mention his name on this last record I did ["Call Him Up," by the Voices of 6th Ave.]. He would do shows all around and he ran gay clubs and what-have-you. I started working for him as a DJ in a club he opened called the Doll House. That was on the corner of William Street and Halsey Street, on top of Sparky J's. I might not have developed a real passion for club music, or the type of club music that the gay crowd wanted to hear, if I had not been involved with him. He had a partner named Dorian Paris. Sometimes they'd give balls. They'd rent out a big hall and have these big outlandish balls. They'd rent out the Masons' Hall on Bergen Street or Tyree's [the Irvington Manor], or the Coronet, and they would pack 'em in. One thing that I think was very influential about him was the way he would pantomime to a song. Ya know it's a record playin, but you would forget about that when he put on a show. It was the costumes that they would wear. He'd bring that whole look, like a star has just walked through the room. Lavish gowns with sequins. I know when I got into music and got to my artists, I wanted to try to project that same thing into them. That whenever they did a show, soon as you walk up on that stage, everybody knows that you're a star. You'd have that grandness about you. Try to have those types of clothes that project that real grandness.

By that time I had started really gettin into the music that I was hear-

ing at Le Joc's. And the music I was hearing at the Docks. To me, club music, what I would officially say is club music, the influences were disco, which was like I said, that 130 bpm stuff, all that stuff that was comin out on Casablanca, the Cerrone stuff and everything, you had all a that and then you still had a lot of funk that was bein played in the live clubs, the straight black clubs. And then at one point it was like the blacks started getting into music that was lower in beats, that were like 116 bpm, 118, in that realm, mixed in with some other stuff that wasn't mainstream. The B-52s, "Private Idaho," Devo. A lot of import stuff. Then you had all of the Salsoul stuff, which was like, Jocelyn Brown, and practically everything that came out on Prelude. They were getting into 120, 116 bpm and then it was like the white population that were going to the clubs, they stayed in that 130 bpm realm.

Club was definitely influenced by the gay black experience. I think it just started evolving from that. Al Murphy, with his persona, the way he used to do things. If you was to ask me what factors made the music different [at Zanzibar] than anywhere else, I would say Al Murphy's influence on Zanzibar, cause if Al Murphy did not come into Zanzibar, it'd be a totally different club. His style, his influence, that I saw him project on other clubs, that's the feeling that he put in Zanzibar. When you went in there it was that same type of feelin. The people, he had his choice people in there that you would know weren't into anything that was normal, that you would really hear on the radio or whatever. It was a certain type of music that they would react to. They would be jumping up and down, flipping over and whatnot. You see a bunch of people doin that, oh, wow, that must be the music, that must be the thing. It was like you there to dance. I just didn't get that from any other club. Ya know, it was only the clubs that he was involved with that I really got that sense that you're here for the music and you're not here for anything else. At least the music first. That if you was gonna pick somebody up that night or whatever, that was secondary. The music was always first. I had come from somewheres different. That first night I had went to Le Joc's, I wanted to hear some of that commercial stuff and I'm quite sure that there was other people that were like me, that wanted to hear it, but you wouldn't hear it. I mean, if you go up there and ask the DJ if he can play it, "No, I don't have it. No, I'm not playin it." The clubs that Al Murphy was involved with, it was like, this what I'm about and this is what I'm givin you and whatever you might've got somewheres else, you could forgit it, cause this is what it's about here. And I think that's the mentality that he put into Zanzibar . . . and not compromising with anybody



Bobby White (seated) and friends:
(clockwise from upper left), Jake, Rich Gordon, Carol Jones and Dorian Paris.

else. Eventually, as time went on, that became what club was about. It was like they said, "This is what it's about." You start projecting that for at least four or five years and you've got a new generation of people comin in and eventually, it just starts becoming a part of the culture.

Richard Long built the sound system there. Hippy was the DJ. The selection of music that the DJs would find is what eventually gave club its sound. It was definitely different from what was happenin anywhere else. It was not commercial soundin at all. It was pretty much the same as the Garage. When I went to the Garage, the sound system was incredible. From what I understand, Richard Long created the system at the Garage to be like no other. He had his systems in other clubs, but he made sure that no other clubs sounded like that. It was almost like he'd give you a little of the sound in the other clubs, but the Garage was his pet club. He made sure the sound system in there was top notch. Anything that Larry Levan played in there would just sound awesome. But I never felt that Larry Levan was almighty great DJ, as far as transition mixing, riding records, stuff like that. He didn't really do any of that. In terms of his spinnin ability, I never felt that he was that great. What was great about him was his selection of music. It was his selection and the timing of his records that was just so *on*. His programming was really happenin. [The sound at the Garage] was a combination of the floor, the room size, the ceiling was high but not too high. It was just proportionally correct, as far as the room was concerned. Richard Long would build the speakers inside the club. It wasn't like the speakers were built outside and brought in. He built the speakers around the environment of the room. So it would be acoustically correct.

To top that off, he's the one who invented—cause I don't know of anyone who was doin it at that time—the crossover, a certain kind of crossover. Not the normal crossover. It was designed for a kind of DJ application. The crossover is a network that bridges the lows, the highs and the mids together. The way he had it built, it was between bein a crossover and a tone-type of thing where he could snatch the whole mid-frequency thing out and all you would hear would be the bass frequency or the high-end frequency, and the whole mid would be out, or you could take the bass and mids out and just hear the highs. So it enabled you to do a lot of little catchy things that you couldn't normally do. Plus, they were playing a lot of things off of reel-to-reel. People would bring stuff up there that weren't out yet. I know that I found out by accident that you could echo with the reel-to-reel. You could use it as an echo device. So that's what made the Garage and Zanzibar a lot different and inter-

esting. You could hear music delayed. You could hear the frequencies bein snatched in and out. All of that kind of stuff and workin the system along with the light show.

If I wanna go back, I would say we were influenced by Roy Ayers. Roy Ayers used to be around a lot, gigging. The Whatnots were pretty hot. Then you had Hippy. Hippy started getting very popular and he would do mixes on stuff. He was involved in that Quality label, so he would have something that was like r&b, funk, disco, whatever it was, but he would come in and put that feel to it that was a particular sound. Givin it that type of sound. It's like the DJs that were trendy in that particular thing would start doin mixes and stuff. As far as the guys I know, when the house thing came, the record that I did with Paul Scott was considered the first house record, "Off the Wall." That was '84, '85. I know it was right before "Music Is The Key" [by J.M. Silk] came out, which was considered the first house record. Before that, you had Timmy Regisford come in and basically, when Timmy started playing on BLS and he hooked up with Boyd Jarvis, that was was the stuff that used to get us moving in music. He'd strip it down to the rawest form and just give you the bass line and the drum track.

As far as New Jersey is concerned, it's Zanzibar, the influence that Al Murphy had on Zanzibar, the flavor of the music that he wanted played. When I started to make music, a lot of things were leaving. By this time, I was all into it. Everybody that went to the Garage or any place else that was of that type of feel, came to the Doll House. When the Doll House folded, I kept the place goin and I had really grown a passion for that kind of sound. After a while, it was leaving. I would go to the stores and I'd try to keep that sound goin, tryin to find music that would fit into that flavor, and it was slowly leaving. So it was like, Dag, what are we gonna do? The stuff that Timmy would play that was not released, everybody in New Jersey was into enjoying that, wanting that. Prelude was folding. Salsoul was folding. A lot of that stuff that you would play was coming out on those labels that were folding. For me, it was tryin to find that sound.

I think another one of the influences that's in Jersey that New York didn't have was [W]NJR. That oldie-goldies, that vocal-type of thing. When I think of New Jersey, I think it's a fusion of all of that. The experience of NJR being very song-oriented. More so than BLS or Kiss. What I would say is real soul stuff, vocals that would take you somewhere. But it would be in a r&b-type of form. And we wasn't really gettin that from BLS or Kiss. So you have people going out to clubs that used to

listen to that and loved that vocal-thing, where vocals can take you. You had the influence of the rawness that you was gettin on BLS, with just the bass, you had that rawness hittin and then you had all of that other stuff that was coming in from Zanzibar or wherever, that had an alternative sound, that was just not being played mainstream. If you want to add Chicago, yeah, the beat of Chicago, but everybody in Jersey had a passion for vocals, being spoon-fed on Jocelyn and everything like that. When I did my first record, it was a real experiment and that first record that I said was a house record, that was like a freak accident. It had all the elements of house, but it wasn't meant to be that way. Paul Scott was influenced by Boyd Jarvis and them. He used to play keyboards at the clubs. We were making music just to play in the club. We weren't even thinkin about puttin it out as a record.

A CONVERSATION AT CAMPSITE STUDIO WITH ACE, KELTON COOPER AND DAVE SLADE

Ace

Larry Levan—it was his selection of music that was hot, but to me, the guy who would kick all their butts would be David Todd. David Todd kicked all their butts. David Todd was a DJ in Philly.

Dave

There it is again. Don't Darnell have tapes of David Todd? He was the ultimate. From what I understand, he taught Larry and all them how to play. You ask 'em who David Todd is and they'll praise him. David Todd was God.

Kelton

Tony Humphries gets on his knees.

Ace

David taught Tony Humphries. When Tony first started playing, the way Tony used to sound, as far as those real smooth transitions, that was David Todd. Cause I know that when I first started listenin to Tony, I would be in the DJ booth and I would see him go from one song to another and I couldn't even tell. It was just that smooth. David Todd, he was the master at that. I used to go hear him in Philadelphia. That man would run two records all the way through and the way he did it and the way the sound system was, was like you was havin sex and you'd be climaxin and climaxin. I'm tellin you, it was just masterful. He would

collage the tracks together and he would just run 'em. It would just sound like one record.

Kelton

Let me tell ya somethin. First time I heard Tony Humphries live [1982] down at Zanzibar, he was playin Wednesday nights and Saturday nights. He was unbelievable. He doesn't play like that anymore. He would play a two-hour set and the records he would play and how he would play 'em was perfect mixin, nothin was off-beat. It rise and it rise and it climax. Then he'd let you down and he'd build you back up again and then he'd bring you back down. It was like ridin a carousel. That's what really separated him from all the rest of the DJs that were playin then. His programmin. Certain records that Tony would play, you'd sit there and go, How'd he mix that? You'd go home and try to mix it and you couldn't do it.

Ace

But David Todd, to this day. I don't know anybody.

Kelton

It was like hands down [bows down]. Tony Humphries will tell you himself.

Larry would kill me, man. He would play "Love Honey." When the break would come, he'd turn out all the lights, you'd see the blue lights come on in the Garage, you'd see the balloons fall out the ceiling. He was a mood-setter. That's the one thing I could appreciate about Larry Levan. He would always set a mood to whatever record he would play. He always set a mood for the club to go with. And you went wit it.

Dave

That's what I mean. You got ta remember, he didn't start out as a DJ. He started out as a lighter. I remember when he was doin the lights for Nicky Siano. So he knew how to set 'em up. And you gotta face facts: the Garage was one of a kind. No other club could take its place, because it started out as a gay club, but it built as a theatrical club, cause you never knew what they was gonna put in there, or how the mood was gonna be set.

Kelton

Tony doesn't like rap. Zanzibar, the way the club was set up, it's a standard club for underground danceable r&b music. That's the format that Zanzibar has portrayed all these years.

Dave

Certain records he played were rap. Like educational raps. If it was a rap record, it had to be funky for him to play it. Like now, you can go into Zanzibar on a Saturday and to me it's a shame that they play rap records in there now. The place wasn't meant to be that way. It was meant to be very relaxed. You walk in now and you hear a rap record and ten minutes later you got somebody in there fighting. It's not meant for that. I can't take it.

Ace

Before the Garage opened, didn't Al Murphy do stuff with Michael Brody and them [owners of the Garage], give parties, underground parties, in the city?

Dave

Only thing I know is that Larry worked with Nicky Siano and Larry hooked up with Michael Brody. And they started throwin parties. I don't know if Al was involved or not. He had Le Joc's, so he mighta been.

If you wanna get to the roots of the Jersey sound, I'd say you got to go back to Le Joc's, La Casa, which was owned by Butchy, then Docks. Docks was actually the mini-Garage of New Jersey. It held maybe three-hundred-seventy-five people. Docks started in '77-'78. On a Sunday it used to kick Zanzibar in the butt. Nobody went to Zanzibar.

Hippy was smooth, too. Hippy was very creative. He knew the music so well that he ran two records together and they locked together. The guy was good. He was the DJ at Zanzibar for a good two years. I'm not takin it from Tony, everybody say Tony made Zanzibar—you had to be back there to see who made Zanzibar. Hippy used to play "Heartbreak Hotel," and that place was Heartbreak Hotel.

Ace

To me, it's almost like Al Murphy set the standard. He had already spoon-fed Hippy. Hippy was like, I'm in it, I already have this passion for this type of music, the music that I want to play. So Zanzibar had already created its own persona. When Tony came in it's like takin that and smoothin everything out. Ran with it and took it to another level and made it real clean and polished.

Dave

Between the time that Hippy left and Tony came, you had Francois [Kervorkian] in there, Larry Patterson, Tee Scott, Larry. When he did special spots, that place was jam packed. That was the first time I saw a DJ

bring people from all over the area to one club.

Kelton

What's so funny about that, when Larry Levan would come in to Zanzibar and play, the whole atmosphere of the club would change. You felt like you were in the Garage again. That's what these DJs brought to the club. Whoever was playin brought their own persona that night.

Dave

You knew that if Larry would play a record, the record would go off and everybody would stand there and clap. You gave it up to him.

Kelton

I can even break it down simpler than that. My interpretation of Larry Levan is that he was a human jukebox. The way he had the club programmed. You would hear a record and you would hear the record from the beginning to the end. Then he'd cue up the next record. After the record went off, people would clap and chant, Larry, Larry, Larry. You didn't know what he was gonna play. And he always played mind games on the crowd. He always kept you anticipatin and he would always throw you off-guard. You'd never know what to expect from him.

Dave

Even today. You got Timmy, you got Merlin playin. I mean, you don't knock those guys, they're trend-setters too, but they didn't come on to the scene when I was back there hanging at the Garage, or the Docks, or Buttermilk Bottom, or Melons, or the Cuckoo's Nest. I'm twenty-nine now. I've been hangin at clubs since I was twelve years old. I had no business bein there, but I respected the music.

Ace

To me, the difference between the music of today and the music back then, number one, back then, the way they used to play, it was like, again, that roller-coaster ride. And the vocals or whatever was happenin, would take you on a trip. One song could take you on a journey. A perfect example was "Ain't No Mountain High Enough." That's a journey record.

The difference between now and then is that we're livin in an age where everything is computerized and it's fast. When you look at the videos, everything is quick edits, everything is cut up. Now, when the kids hear a song, everything has to be instant. It's got to be, "Hit me, hit me." It's got to be, "Hit me now. I don't wanta wait till the end or middle of the song to hear the ad-libs. Give me the meat now. Hit me now."

For me, it's not somethin I can listen to and adore. What gets me high

ACE, KELTON & DAVE

is the person singin, the basic element of r&b. Soul music is something that hits you in the soul. That's what gets me. The person singin is touchin your soul and is takin you somewhere. Either takin you someplace you been or takin you someplace you never been. So you definitely relate to something they're singin about and you *feel* what they're singin about.

Kelton

As for the music we're doin, as you can tell, we're from the old school. I like songs. You have nothin unless you have a song. That's the most important thing. You could put tracks together, you can do anything you want, but it has to be a song. It has to have lyrics, it has to say somethin to you.

See, where that Jersey sound basically came from—we listened to a lot of the old Philly stuff. Philadelphia International. Norman Harris and those guys. That's where that sound came from. The orchestrations and the arrangements. The only different twist that we added to it was that we put danceable drumbeats to it. And just updated the sound. If you listen to the heavy house stuff that's bein done now, from Jersey, if you listen to the Salsoul records, it's all the same thing. NJR also had a big hand, very big hand.

Ace

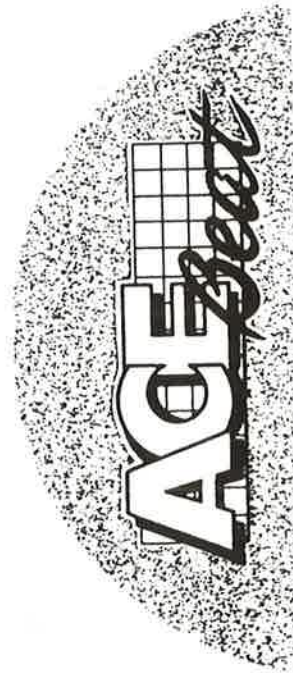
The people in this area, we're a Blue Magic-Delfonics-Whispers town. That whole vocal-type of message thing is instilled.

Dave

Don't forget me and Kelton's favorite, Parliament-Funkadelic.

Ace

Vocally, there's not that much difference between the feelin that you get from Gospel vocals and club vocals. They're very close. The execution, the attack, is the same.



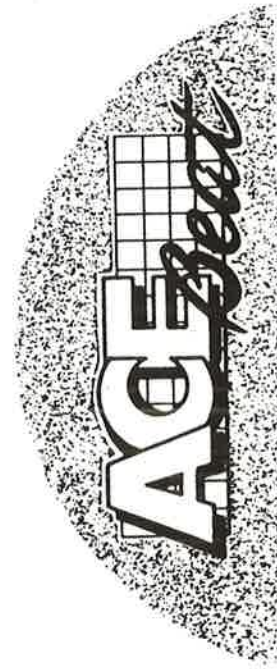
VOICES OF 6th AVE.

Call Him Up

Side A—The Extended
Testimonial Mix—10:00
Side B—(1) Inspirational
Radio Mix—8:00
(2) Jump and Shout
Dub Mix—9:25

Writers: Rickey Grundy and
Herman Netter
Savkos Music (BMI)
Produced, mixed and edited by
Tyrone Payton for Intense Music
Prod. and Paul Scott and Shank
Thompson for B.O.P. Prod.
Associate Producer: Earl Robinson
Recorded at Campsite Studio
Executive Producer: Ace Mungin

ACE 0008 A
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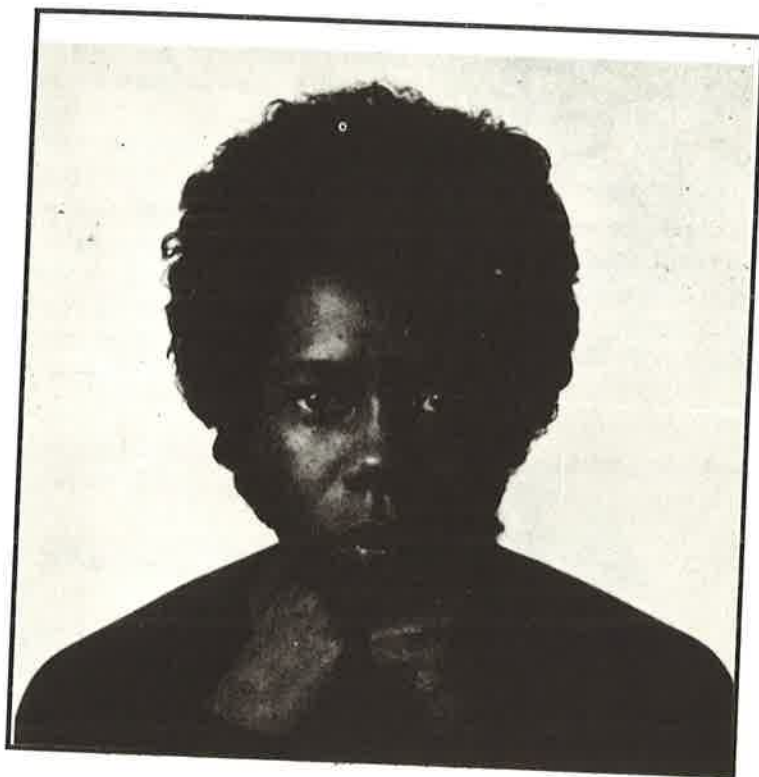
Special Thanks And Love to

Charvoni, Joey Washington,
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who helped on this project.

In Memory "91" of
GUY VAUGHN
BARBARA SMITH
BOBBY WHITE
D. PARIS

ACE 0008 B



Albert Murphy in 1973

SHELTON HAYES

The Club

I. LE JOC

It used to be an old art gallery, at 36 Halsey Street. This older guy housed his art work there. He did framing and gold leafing. The ceilings were unusually high. It was spacious. Just unusually large. It was a two-story walk-through, and in the back there was no second floor. You could look up from the ground floor and see straight up to the roof. Albert went in and took this space and just turned it around into where you actually felt like you were in someone's house. This huge house.

It was amazing. His idea was fun. Gay la fun. That was Albert. I get kind of emotional when I talk about him. He was a great teacher for me. It was just amazing, his whole concept for entertainment. Because of his character, everything from his personal life style to his business style was always overdone. If he did a theme party, it could not be just balloons. It had to be extravagancy. Le Joc* was his dream.

When you first entered, after you went past the desk where you paid, you walked around a wall and all of a sudden you were in someone's living room. And you didn't expect that. He had a fantastic eye for decorating, and there were couches and pillows spread around the room. Then you would go through into a kitchen area where there was a canopy over a dining table which was set up as a fruit bar. There was a constant flow in the kitchen of whatever he felt like that night [but no alcohol]. The basic fruit bar was a huge horn of plenty, a basket filled with all kinds of exotic fruits. He always had fabulous girls working behind the fruit bar, always beautiful and done up. There were platters where you would have

* Pronounced with a soft "J."

apple butter and raisin bread, onion dip with potato chips, etc., a vegetable platter with some type of dip. That was basic. And then later in the evening a turkey might appear on the bar. He would cook it beforehand, sometimes it would still be cooking when the club opened. They had full cooking facilities, but it wasn't industrial cooking. It was a simple stove with an oven, a sink and a refrigerator, but he made it work. I remember one night for New Year's he did ham hocks and black-eyed peas. You just never knew. You never knew.

Against the wall was a huge bookshelf under a staircase, and when you went upstairs there was a *den*. Albert loved doves, and there was a huge bird cage of doves up in the den. Off from the den was the DJ booth. From the den you went out onto a balcony that surrounded the dance floor, which was actually set up like a huge ballroom. It wasn't as extravagant as a mansion with a ballroom, but that's the feeling that it gave. It had a skylight, exposed brick walls. And there was a cat, a Siamese cat named Bianca, that actually belonged to Ericka Harris—we used to call Ericka 'Yanna' in the Le Joc family—and this cat would just roam the club during the party. You'd be on the dance floor and this cat would walk across the floor or across the balcony. It was just very interesting. It was one of the most unique places that ever existed. I'm just sorry that it was before its time.

I remember when they were constructing Le Joc. There was an illustrator named Maning, a Filipino gentleman, who came over and got on a scaffold with some charcoal and sparkles and created what many people thought was a woman, but it was not a woman. It was a transvestite. Well, it was a drag queen. It was not planned. It was not rehearsed. It was just out of the blue. It was at the far end of the dance floor. He said, "I want to put a sketch on the wall." And he sketched this drag queen. And I mean, she stood every bit of twenty-five feet tall. He took these two blue rhinestones and those were her eyeballs. Her body was covered with glitter. It was rather exotic. Well-proportioned. His legs were slightly parted so that you could distinguish the fact that he was a man because he had a jock strap on, but as you went up his body he also had these breasts. So wherever you were on the dance floor, it looked like this boy was watching you. That became the logo. Surrounding her were exposed brick walls. Maning was an illustrator who was popular during the early '70s in Manhattan. He was just another person that Albert knew who came into the space and said, "I love this place. Let me contribute something to it." Many people had that type of attitude. There were people who would come and bring in trees and say, "See what you can do with

this. If you can use it, fine." Local artists would come in and give him paintings. People would do floral arrangements. He had that type of personality that just attracted people. It was magic.

The club would open around ten. We would all get there at nine. The famous line was, "Places." Al would come through the club and he would yell, "Places, everyone." It was like a big house party. It never seemed like a club. You would walk in the living room and you could see, on the sofa, the famous model Billie Blair, or Pat Cleveland, Beverly Johnson, Steven Burrows, Willi Smith. You'd see all these beautiful, fabulous people just laid out on the sofa, someone sitting on the floor, someone on the arm of the chair. I mean, it was just so relaxed and comfortable, very safe, that's what made it so fashionable. I mean, how many places in *Newark*, back in the early '70s, could you go and see these fashion celebrities? It did not exist.

You had people there who were anywhere from eighteen- to fifty- and sixty-years old. Albert's friends—starting off, there was Jamie McDonald, who is a designer from Newark. I remember he drew a membership card with two drag queens on it. Unfortunately, most of the Le Joc family have passed away. Some of the people who were at the center of the club were Tommy Garrett, Yvonne Garrett, Paul Wilson, Arthur Howard, Ray Parker, Darryl Rochester, Barry Hunter, Larry Patterson, Marvin Davis, Donna Davis, Buford Hodge, Carl Wilson, Bobby Lyle, Cybil Moore, Ericka Harris, the Vaughn sisters—the list goes on. They were all artistic.

The musical feeling of the club would depend on the mood of Larry Patterson that particular evening. Gloria Gaynor was the disco queen then, so anything she did during that time reminds me of Le Joc. Donna Summers, Vicki Sue Robinson, City Country City. It wasn't identified then, but now you would call it underground music. You had songs like "Black-Skin, Blue-Eyed Boys" [The Equals], which was a very popular club song then. It was a rebellion against war—"Black-skin, blue-eyed boys / Ain't gonna fight no war." The gospel song by Gloria Spencer, "I Got It," was a very popular dance song. "It's Gonna Rain" ["Rain 2,000," by Titanic]; Exuma, which was an African-type beat, bongos and maracas. "Love Is The Message" was very popular then. A lot of the commercial music was not played, but "Psychedelic Shack"—the lyrics were almost like a perfect description of Le Joc: "Millionaires, kings and queens / They all go there to do their thing / Doesn't matter what you wear . . ." That's kinda what it was like. There's an album cover to a Marvin Gaye record [*I Want You*] which is a lot like what the club looked like.

Most of the time it started out with a bang. And then it would mellow out in the wee hours of the morning. Around three, four in the morning, it would reach its peak, and then from four on it would start to dwindle down. Something that I always thought was so romantic was that there was a skylight over the dance floor, so whenever the sun would come up, you would slowly watch the club lights change. The mirrored ball would all of a sudden lose its reflection, the red and blue and amber, whatever color lights would be flashed, would all of a sudden become part of the sunlight. Then it would become more of a lounge. Most of the crowd would be leaving, but you would still have people who would sit around and have conversation. The volume would go down some and he would play slower classics—Nina Simone, Bette Midler, that kind of thing. Some mornings, Al would do a big breakfast. This would sometimes go on until twelve or one o'clock in the afternoon. If you felt like going home, you did. If you didn't, you'd fall out, grab a sofa, grab a pillow, and that would be it. Whenever you would wake up, you would make it home.

Mainly Le Joc was just fun. It was like a meeting place. You would meet your friends there and sit around and converse. It was also a period of a lot of house parties. So you would always find out what was happening the next weekend, who was having a party. But no one would have a party on Saturday night, because everyone would be at Le Joc. It started out just Saturday, then it branched out to Fridays, but it was never very successful. Saturday was the night. I ran the door at Le Joc and there were nights when the place would be so crowded that we'd just have to lock the door.

Le Joc had no identity, in terms of gender. You could be male, female, gay, straight, it did not matter. Whoever, whatever you wanted, you could do it. No one looked upon you strangely or questioned what you were doing. If you came there and you were gay and didn't want to be seen in a "gay" environment, you could still come there and cruise on the side and have your girlfriend or your boyfriend sit beside you, but you could still look and exchange a phone number or whatever. I think that was the uniqueness of Le Joc and what made for the popularity of that place. You could be incognito, but at the same time you could just be yourself.

I think this would be the time when Le Joc would be so much in demand. Because I think it would be even more intense now. Clubs have gone through all the commercial changes and people are looking for intimacy, special effects, all those things that Le Joc offered.

As far as the staff went, there was one Newark policeman at the door. Myself at the door, one person in the coatroom, the girls behind the fruit bar, the DJ and a light man. I don't know if the policeman was a legal requirement or if that was just Al's idea to have security enforcement there, in case. I couldn't imagine a club today without a security staff. Today, Zanzibar has a security staff of ten to fifteen security guards walking around with radios. It's needed now. Then it wasn't, because then people were a little more mature as far as going out and partying. It was a different time. The drug problem was not as intense as it is now. Their upbringing was totally different. They had a lot of respect for themselves. It was just unheard of, in public, at Le Joc anyway, for people to be falling over, whether you were drunk or intoxicated on drugs. You composed yourself. [Openly doing drugs would be frowned upon] by all means. He didn't endorse those things, even though he knew it existed. Because of the times, people didn't just openly do something like that in public. Discretion was always used. I think it had a great deal to do with people and their pride in themselves. If you did drugs, you didn't want the world to know about it. So you would go into a private place, like the bathroom, close the door, and do whatever you wanted to do in there. You have to also take into consideration that this was kinda like the end of the love-child period and hallucinogens were very popular then. Cocaine was not a mainstream drug at that particular time. So, if you came out and you took a little tab of something, no one ever saw it. You were smiling and on the dance floor, and who noticed it?

As far as the downfall of the club—someone introduced the idea of having a gay night where it was all men, and then a female night, where it was all women. When we tried that, it did not work, at all. And then we started to get a lot of confrontations from the police. The area started to become more residential. So the people were complaining a lot about the loud music. Then it got to a point where the police would come in, but they could never find anything to shut it down for, because Al had the proper fire exits, fire extinguishers, etc. So what they would do is, they would ticket all the cars. Any cars that were parked within a two-block radius of the club would get ticketed. And they would do this every week.

Le Joc closed up there and shortly afterwards opened up on Market Street, across from Bamberger's. But it was never the same again. The Le Joc family kinda like broke up. A lot of people were going through personal problems. Albert was going through a lot of personal problems. And all of that was reflected at the new club. It never really took off the

way the first one did. When that one closed, Albert went to work. He worked at several different places just to make a living. He went back to doing fashion shows. I left the country. Larry Patterson moved to New York. Everybody kinda went in separate directions.

II. ZANZIBAR

Eventually, the Bergers came on the scene, Miles Berger, the Berger Hotel Corporation, and they bought the Lincoln Motel, which used to be the Holiday Inn. They had this huge ballroom and they wanted to do something with it, but they didn't know what. A young lady by the name of Cathy Scott introduced Albert to Miles and apparently Miles was impressed with Al's vast reputation and that's when Abe's came about, which eventually evolved into Club Zanzibar. Going back in between, Al went back into retail. He was working in a clothing store, Heaven On Earth, on Broad Street. Worked there for many years. But, you know, the magic about him was that anything he touched would become successful. I remember Bun-Al's, an Army-Navy store on Market Street. It was doing very bad. Albert started working there and all of a sudden business was booming.

The story of how I started working at Zanzibar is—I was living in California. I was modeling. I heard about Abe's and I knew Albert was working there. I was on my way to Europe and I stopped in Manhattan and I came over one afternoon to just see the place. I walked up the stairs and I ran into this young lady and she said, "May I help you?" I said, "Hello. I'm here to see Al Murphy." She said, "He's in his office. Who shall I say is calling?" I said, "Please don't tell him. I'd like to surprise him." She took me upstairs and I walked in the door and Albert was sitting behind the desk talking on the telephone. He looked up and literally leaped over the desk and grabbed me. It was very emotional and extremely dramatic. He turned around and said to Susan Berger, Miles' wife, "This is Shelton Hayes, the guy that I've been telling you about." She took me into her husband's office and Al said, "This is the guy that I've been telling you about. This is the guy who can control your door." And Miles says, "Good. You're hired. Be at work this weekend." I looked at him and smiled and I said, "Thank you, but I'm not looking for employment." But later, I did say, "Well, we can talk about it." A bit later [early 1980], when I was modeling in Europe, Al telegraphed me, "You must come back." That's how I started at Zanzibar.

I always looked at Zanzibar as a huge monster that you had to keep

under a ball and chain, because if you didn't, it could easily get out of control. That's how it started out. Totally out of control. There was very much an element of Broad Street at Abe's. That area was known for prostitution. It was like a red-light district. After a certain hour you just did not go to that area. If you did, you took your chances. Whatever happened, happened. Then Albert, the staff, myself and the Newark Police Department, with a lot of hard work, turned it around.

We wanted to create a classic club where people could come and feel safe and not have to worry. I can remember nights of physically fighting at the door. There was a certain element of people we did not want in there, because they were trouble. Unfortunately, a lot of times you had to use visual contact and judgment to kinda figure it out. If I felt this person was not proper—and it had nothing to do with their dress or whatever, it was basically their attitude—I wouldn't let them in. After the first year of me working at the door it was no longer hard work. It became a lot of fun. That policy at the door actually went on for six or seven years, but it became less difficult, because a reputation had gone out to say don't go there unless you have it in order. Either you're gonna be composed and conduct yourself in a civil manner or you're gonna stay outside. It was an identification mark for Albert. Not that he wanted to exclude anyone from partying, but he wanted to keep a certain vibration. That's what I learned from him.

See, the thing with Le Joc was that it was put together on a very low budget, because there was not an enormous amount of money. At that time you didn't really need an enormous amount of money to create a club. But when he and Miles collaborated together, Miles had the finances and Albert had the ideas. I'm into astrology to a certain degree. As Geminis, they both had a knack of overdoing everything. Albert would come up with ideas and say, "For this anniversary party—first of all, let's create a theme." For example, one anniversary party the theme was the jungle. Miles had the entire club done like a jungle. Zanzibar itself is the name of an African island. When they first opened the club they had these huge satin palm trees, I thought they were the gaudiest thing I had ever seen, but it went along with the theme. There was a cage as soon as you walked in the door with a live boa constrictor. There were animal skins on the walls. Leopard cushions. It gave you that feeling. Well, as it went along, between the customers stealing the animal skins off the walls and a lot of other things, it just took on a different transition. But the point I'm making is that they both had elaborate ideas. Albert's imagination went upward and beyond, and what he could not imagine, I could. We

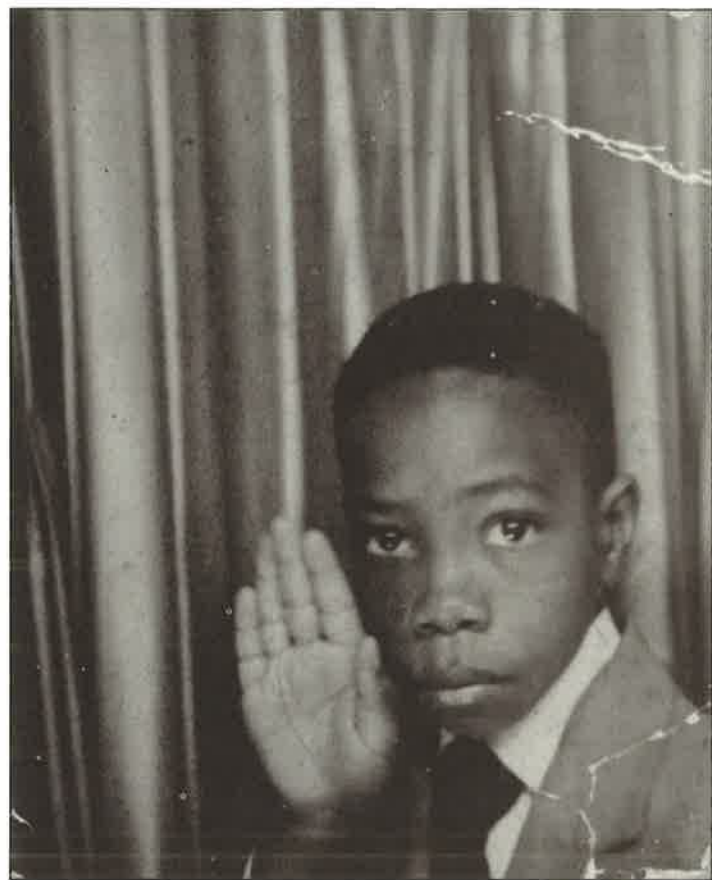
would put our heads together and Miles always had the finances to produce them. That same anniversary party with the jungle—there was a swimming pool outside of Club Zanzibar, and alongside the pool there was a huge tent and there were cages with all types of wild animals. There was a leopard, there was a lion, there was a black panther.

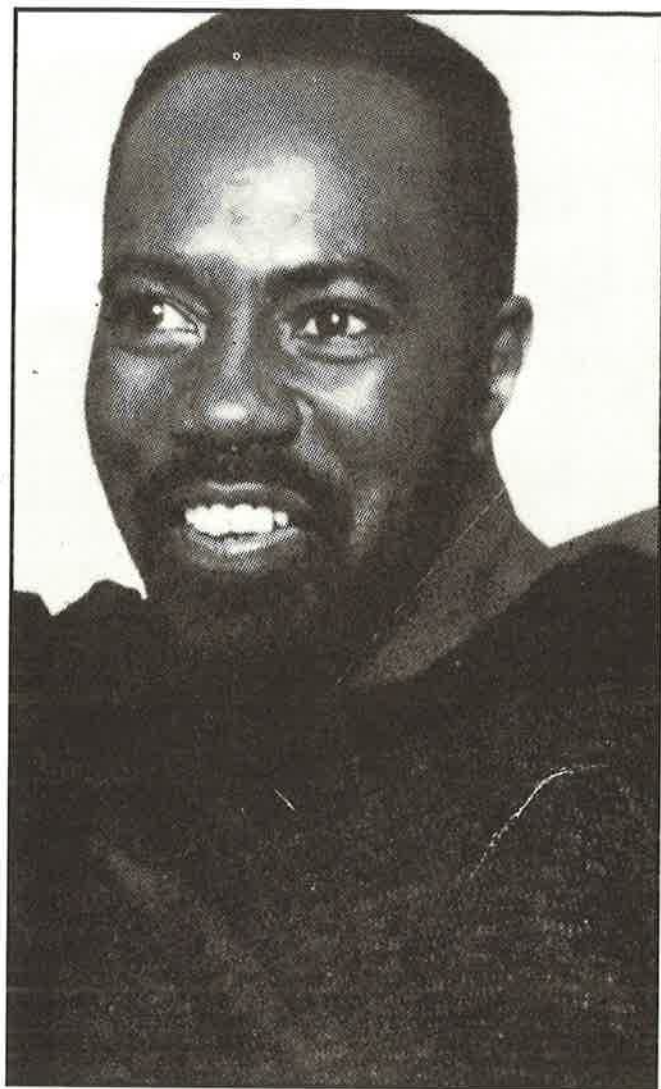
It was a business investment for Miles, of course. It was done to attract people, to make money, but at the same time it was giving Newark something that it had never seen before. Working for him all the years that I worked for him, that's what I think his whole concept was about. Let's do this to shock this city. Let's give them something to talk about forever. One year it was the circus. There was a three-ring circus going on in the parking lot. You had the man on the stilts and the big flashing lights. You had clowns and jugglers. They had the Siamese twins. It was just a zoo. All night long this went on. There was even a baby elephant that they brought up into the club. These were the anniversary parties. And again, this was really an extension of what Albert wanted to do with Le Joc, but he never accumulated enough funds to create these kinds of things. He did it on a smaller scale. But when he and Miles got together, the finances came together to the point where he could create these things. Albert's idea was always that he wanted to bring artists that people in Newark would never really get to see. I mean, a lot of the young people in Newark would not go into New York. Even though it's twenty minutes away, they just wouldn't. They were afraid of Manhattan, for whatever reason. You go beyond Elizabeth, going south, and a lot of these people, if you said, "Garage," or "Reade Street," they'd look at you like they never heard of it. By bringing this to Newark, he gave them a place to go where they still felt comfortable in New Jersey, but they got what they thought was the image of New York.

Art

A PORTFOLIO

Albert Murphy
Newark's Poet of Style





GARY JARDIM

Al Murphy and the Club Music Aesthetic in Newark

At the Saturday Night Function primary emphasis is placed upon aesthetics not ethics. What is good in such circumstances is the beautiful, without which there can be no good time. What counts is elegance (not only in the music and the dance movement but in the survival technology inherent in the ritual as well).

— Albert Murray

Club music as an art form is a social aesthetic defined by its two major components: the music itself and the all-out approach to partying within which the music takes place, the two interconnected in the classic call-and-response patterns of black music. As Ace Mungin points out, it was the DJs' selection of music that created club as a sound, but it was the redefinition of the Saturday Night Function that created the context for club to grow as a popular social form. Integral to that redefinition is the idea of the club as a sanctuary from the constraints of the "real" world. The greatness of the club artist, as embodied in the person of the DJ, is measured by his ability to interact with the dynamics of the dance floor and his power to take the crowd on a journey. And, since club is a low-down (read: underground) black thing (however much guided by a universal spirit), the means of travel is rhythm, as physical exercise and as emotional expression. The club aesthetic breaks down the mind/body dualism and conceives of the journey as ecstatic fusion of mind, body and spirit. The goal of the journey, after all, is to transcend the "real" world, to connect with the spirit. As in the Afro-American tra-

dition of using the music as a device to summon the promised land. Just look at the titles of classic club songs: "Reachin'." "Someday." "Free Man." "Fly Robin Fly." "Love Is the Message." "My Love Is Free." "Ain't No Mountain High Enough."

Disco became a mainstream phenomenon in the '70s, but its roots have always been in underground black style, and after disco's commercial peak, underground dance music rooted in the tradition of the classic black disco records continued to evolve in black communities across the country almost totally outside the realm of radio and the major record companies. This lack of connection to mass media was both strength and weakness. It allowed club to develop in a self-determined grass-roots context, but it made the economics of club tenuous. The great thing about the story of how club took root in Newark is how the city became one of the two or three key places for the development of club as a form, and in the way people here embraced the music as popular style. People here took to the flowing, elegant, love-spirit humaneness of the music. In fact they nurtured it and made it bloom into a sanctified fusion of rhythmic invention, song-based lyricism and positive spirituality. While it may seem surprising to some that Newark is rivaled only by New York as a key site in the evolution of club, this is neither mysterious nor coincidental. One need look no further than Club Zanzibar, which ranks alongside the Paradise Garage as one of the music's two greatest clubs, to begin to understand how it happened.

The two most obvious factors in Zanzibar's prominence as a classic club are its sound system and the quality and innovation of the club's DJs. In terms of the sound system, Zanzibar will go down in history as one of the two greatest creations of Richard Long (the other being the Garage), club's electronic genius. It was Long's genius to build a sonic environment, which one critic likened to an experimental Bell sound laboratory, capable of the massive volume necessary for inducing club's ecstatic, physically-engrossing experience while at the same time retaining a crystal-clear tonal clarity. But Long went further, enhancing the combination of volume and clarity by his invention of an electronic-network DJ application called the crossover, which allowed DJs to play with the different sonic elements like so many independent molecules, enabling them to tap into the realm of the imaginary by creating shifting sonic textures which could unfold like a psychedelic, or afrodelic, dreamworld text. The sensual power of this kind of physically-engrossing approach to sound and movement can be seen in the rave/techno music taking hold as a new form of rock music, a form that can be thought of as club music

for white people. For while techno fixates on mechanical beat as defining metaphor, club's rhythmic sensibility is all about elegance and the power of soul.

The sonic technology of Zanzibar made the growth of the club aesthetic possible, but it was the quality of its DJs which created a standard for the form. While it may be difficult for some to see Newark as a center of world culture, the fact is that no other club in the world could match Zanzibar for the quality and innovation of its DJs. True, Larry Levan practically invented club, but he was the only DJ at the Garage. Zanzibar became a stage for club's other master DJs, in the process creating a competition which in many ways made Zanzibar even more exciting than the Garage. David Morales, Francois Kervorkian, Tee Scott, Larry Levan, and later, Tony Humphries, the DJs who set the quality standard for club, were Zanzibar's *regular* jocks.

What made Zanzibar unique, and the factor which led to the original music scene that eventually came out of it, was that, while disco was born and nurtured by a predominantly gay audience, club developed in Newark as a public form. So while the Garage and earlier clubs like the Gallery, the Loft, and Reade Street were private clubs, and therefore part of a subculture, Zanzibar's public character opened it up to the creative input of the whole spectrum of musical genius in the community. That's one reason why the Garage, though it was the ultimate classic club, never produced the original music scene that Zanzibar did. So the unique thing about Zanzibar was the way in which gay and straight rubbed up against each other and fused into popular style. While the public nature of Zanzibar meant that the intimacy and protection of clubs like the Garage and Le Joc would be necessarily lost, it also added an extra element of heroism to the idea of the club as sanctuary, since the space was now open to everyone, thus becoming a metaphor for the whole community. But the gay approach to the music as life-affirming context in which to transcend the strictures of the "normal" remained embedded in club. The gay perspective's insights into the hypocrisy of the "real" world, its fascination with illusion and theater, and its grand sense of playfulness all became elements of club style. The elegant flow motion, the shuffle beat, the love spirit—they were all elements of style pioneered in the pre-disco gay club scene. Just as the yearning for freedom at the core of the civil rights movement became a metaphor adopted by the culture at large, the gay elements in club were embraced by a predominantly straight crowd at Zanzibar and adopted as popular style. The way this worked musically, and in terms of dance, can be gleaned from the early club classics.

To understand how elegance worked as rhythmic sensibility, check out "Touch & Go." For the flow-motion origins, check out "Love Is the Message." For the emotional shuffle-beat groove, check out "My Love Is Free." For the way a gay proclamation of self-determined freedom was embraced by a straight audience, check out the funk of "Free Man" ("I'm a free man / and talkin' 'bout it"). Although America's embrace of the core values of the civil rights movement was and is problematic, we can say that the black community in Newark embraced with a passion the gay sensibility at the heart of club. Kevin Hedge's oral history is a perfect illustration of that—he embraced the style of "Touch & Go" and "Free Man" because he loved the style, and the heart. Ditto for Ace, who explains that his passion for the music would have been unthinkable without the gay influence. Ace's explanation of how Bobby White's sense of grandness informed his idea of the club performer is another example of this whole question of how style worked in Newark. For me, one of the most resonant aspects of the oral history section is the humaneness of Kevin, Ace and Shelton, and how their sweet, deeply-held faith in community seems like such a stark contrast to the fragmented, mean-spirited vibe on the streets today. Granted, these are extraordinary people, but they *are* two of Newark club's key producers and the man who took care of the house.

Beyond Richard Long's innovations, beyond the art of the DJs, beyond the generation of club artists who came up through Zanzibar is Al Murphy, without whom the whole club music aesthetic in Newark would be unimaginable. It was natural for Kevin Hedge to assume that Al got his concept of Zanzibar from the Garage, but in fact, Le Joc, which we can appreciate as the club aesthetic in its pure form, predated the Garage by a full two years. To be sure, Al didn't invent the ecstatic, all-out, all-night party approach, the fruit-bar and non-alcoholic format, the concept of the club as sanctuary, or the vision of the club as a theatrical environment for the expression of free black subjectivity—all of that can be traced back to the early-'70s private gay clubs, but he was part of that original crowd, and it was his genius to imagine and execute the club as a house of style, indeed, as a sanctified house party, which is what he pulled off at Le Joc.

SEARCHING FOR AL MURPHY

I had caught fleeting glimpses of Al Murphy over the years at Zanzibar, but I assumed that he was just the manager, not suspecting that he had in fact invented the club. When I later started to get some per-

spective on the history of club in Newark and inquire about its roots, Al was already gone forever, yet another loved one lost to the virus. Ace kept telling me how Al was the father of the whole scene, but he hadn't known Al that well. He had the good fortune to have experienced Le Joc, but he had only started to get hip to the music when he went to Le Joc and he remembered it from a distance, as it were. By the time I planned this book and made the decision to do an oral history on club in Newark, I figured I could talk to Shelton and get the history of Zanzibar, and then write a short survey of the second-generation music and that would be it. But then I started to wonder about the story of what led up to Zanzibar and Le Joc. I was able to run down people who had been to Le Joc and who had glowing remembrances of Al, and I even found someone who had worked at Le Joc, but no one who could really clue me in to what Al was really all about. It wasn't until I finally ran down Shelton that I began to understand what an extraordinary man Al was. Shelton painted such a beautiful picture of him—I thought I had finally gotten to see Al up-close. But then I became even more interested in searching out Al's story. Unfortunately, much of the Le Joc family is no longer with us, and those who remain proved a difficult group to run down. Then one night, when I thought I was nearing the end of the story, I was walking home from the bus when I struck up a conversation with a guy who was walking alongside me. He had just moved from Philadelphia, so I started telling him about Newark and how I was working on this story about club music. When I got to the part about Le Joc, he told me that he had a cousin who used to go to Le Joc. Turned out his cousin was Darryl Rochester, one of the original Le Joc people.

I had gotten somewhat frustrated in my attempt to uncover the story of Al, but I was struck by the love and generosity of the people I had met along the way and how they all seemed to light up when talking about him. It had become an emotional thing for me, this story of love and freedom at the heart of Newark culture. And when I called Darryl up and we started talking, it all started to come home. Within the hour I was in his living room and we ended up talking for hours. It turns out that not only was Darryl a member of the Le Joc family, he was one of Al's dearest friends and had practically grown up with him (their mothers were friends), although Darryl was about ten years younger. That's a conversation I'll never forget. Darryl opened up to me when he saw that I was sincere and dedicated to telling the world about Al, and the quiet love that came pouring out of him gave the conversation the feeling of an epiphany.

Darryl characterizes Al as an "inspired model. He really wanted to be a big model. . . . But if you can't get those breaks, you create your own stage." So Al started giving fashion shows in the late '60s around Newark—his annual Mother's Day shows were a perennial favorite among women in Newark. From the beginning, the shows were filled with the extravagance that Shelton would notice later at Le Joc and Zanzibar. Al conceived of a fashion show as a kind of grand theater. He used chic high-fashion models—he brought in Beverly Johnson, the first black woman to grace the cover of *Vogue*, and later featured the top New York models, like Iman and Pat Cleveland—next to funky choreographed dance-theater pieces choreographed by Darryl, who was an Alvin Ailey dancer. "It was not about money. It was about trust, integrity. It was art." One show featured a "Slaughter on 10th Avenue" piece complete with zoot suits and guns, sets that included a shoeshine parlor and a smoke-filled room, and a jazz soundtrack. Another show featured the opening act from Cabaret. By the early-'70s, Al was attracting the fab Manhattan fashion underground to Newark with wild, flamboyant, afro-chic celebrations of style. One show featured a Dr. Zhivago look, with long suede coats over culottes and knee-high boots, with the culottes being yanked off to reveal hot pants. As for Al's own personal style, Darryl describes it as "snatched." Meaning, "sharp. Everything was together. No gaps."

THE EARLY YEARS

All through my attempt to find out about Al Murphy I had been looking for photographs of him, but no one seemed to be able to actually come up with one. Finally, Darryl said, "Well, we'll just have to go see Mrs. Murphy. I don't know if she'll open up to us, but we can try." It wasn't easy for Virginia Murphy to lose her only son in the prime of his life, and her feelings of loss are mixed with bitterness and shame. This disease has been a hell of a thing for people to come to terms with, and the loss of a loved one is often complicated by anger at the way people abandon friends and family members in their last days. I drove with Darryl to her Bayview Avenue house and waited outside while he went to see if Virginia was home and to find out if she would see me. My heart skipped a beat when Darryl reappeared and waved, but he brought back a mixed message. Mrs. Murphy said that she didn't have any photographs of Albert but that we could come in. She greeted me politely, and graciously invited me upstairs. She's an attractive woman, with a warm look in her eyes, and as we sat talking in the living room I was hoping she would see that I believed in her son and wanted other people to know

how great he was. By this time, I had expended a lot of energy and emotion in putting this book together and in searching out Al's story, so it was particularly emotional for me when Virginia said, "Where is that book of pictures I have?" I knew this was a good woman, a woman who had been through a lot, a Newark woman who knew about vultures and con artists. So I was really touched that she was opening up to me. Soon we were sitting on the floor going through pages of photographs of Albert, his friends, and his fashion shows. Later on, she asked me which ones I'd like to print in my book.

Subsequently, she and I have talked at length about Albert and about her life, and I've come to understand just what an extraordinary woman she is and how much all of us who have gotten strength out of club music in Newark owe her. I put "perseverance and grace in the face of adversity" on the cover photograph because Virginia enfolded her only son with love and grace against exceptionally heavy odds. You see, Virginia was not only abandoned as a teenager, she had been taken advantage of by a man when she was only thirteen years old. She had Albert shortly after she turned fourteen in 1943. She grew up in Trenton, and only came to Newark to try and find her mother. But when she located her, she found that her mother had other things on her mind. Fortunately, she was able to get a job washing clothes in a laundry in Irvington. She had to stand on a crate in order to reach over the tub. She managed to get a room on Fifteenth Avenue and found a disabled black woman named Florence Hunt who lived on Badger Avenue to take care of Albert and feed him while she worked. Albert's father moved in, but he split after five months. She was undaunted. She turned down welfare, telling a case worker, "I ain't livin' off no \$87 a week. You must be crazy." Listening to her story is a lesson in the power of a mother's love. It's also a story of the way in which people used to pull together and help each other in the old days. "In those days, people would give you clothes. Ya'd never go without food. You could get fish ears and chicken feet for nothin'." She shopped for clothes for Al at a second-hand store on Prince Street. Even at that age, Al seemed to have a thing for style. "He was always careful about what he would wear." Virginia worked two jobs to make ends meet, stamping boxes and modeling lingerie for many years at the Peter Pan Manufacturing Company in Newark.

Albert was a quiet kid. "He wouldn't say ten words a week. But he always watched everything." Virginia remembers one of the women who watched him telling her, "He's the nicest boy. He has so much manners." But he was a "sickly kid," and he had a bad heart. And there were other

problems, too. "He was very small. Thin and petite. . . . He couldn't—he wasn't normal," is the way Virginia put it to me. Other kids would pick at him and call him names. But, like his mother, he seemed to have a quiet determination, secure in his sense of self. Virginia remembers Albert leaving nursery school and locking himself in the house, telling her, "You don't need no one to watch me, mother." He loved to cook, even as a child. Had pork chops ready for her one day when she came home from work when he was five years old. "He loved to play with pots and pans."

Although Virginia is not all that religious, she attended Hightower Sanctified Church, and she used to leave Albert at a day care center there. Not only is it appropriate that Albert would have gone to a sanctified church, given the sanctified roots of the club aesthetic, but it turns out that he became an ordained minister when he was fourteen. He must have been pretty good, because he preached for a couple of years and traveled from Trenton to New York preaching for the church. Virginia remembers him as being "very calm. He would explain whatever he read." Interestingly, Albert met Emily Miles through his church ties, and he modeled for her as a teenager in her Mother's Day fashion shows at the church. Al went to West Side High, but in his senior year he had a teacher who objected to his ever-present Bible and they didn't get along. He wasn't into repeating the grade, so he dropped out. Virginia managed to get him a job at Carlson's Men's Shop in Elizabeth and he moved out on his own shortly thereafter.

COMING OUT

As for Al's influences, Emily Miles, the grande dame of black style in Newark, was number one. Darryl says that she was "his biggest role model. He always relished calling her up to hear her accept his invitation to attend his shows. He was *obsessed* with her." Emily Miles was a dark and beautiful model from the old Newark, but, given the racial oppression of the day, she never got the opportunity that Naomi Sims and Beverly Johnson were to get in later years. But she was an important presence in Newark, still is, and she was well-known for her fashion shows, which used to feature the Jewel Box Revue, a Las Vegas stage-show-like collection of dancers, comedians and flamboyant female impersonators.

But for Darryl, a young gay man struggling to come to terms with his own sexuality and trying to figure out how to make it work in the real world, Al was a role model who offered an inspiring example of how to be gay *and* free. After Darryl graduated from Weequahic High in 1971, Al started showing him around the gay clubs in Manhattan where the

free-spirited ethos that would surface in disco a few years later was flowering underground. It was a charmed historical moment, especially for young gay people, and Darryl still lights up when recalling just how liberating it all was. Listening to him recount those trips to New York with Al is like listening to an oral history of how the whole disco phenomenon unfolded out of the gay subculture in the early-'70s. It was a time of gender-bending experimentation and outlandish style—'20s' house dresses worn with high heels and hot socks over the ankle; the femme pirate look; glitter pins; bandannas worn hanging out of the back pocket. Clubs like the Planetarium and Tamburlaine. And Super Star, which had huge stars for a dance floor and a mirrored ball before anyone heard of disco.

And then there were the key pre-disco lofts such as Dave Mancuso's the Loft, Reade Street, and Richard Long's loft, where Al was hanging out and no doubt developing the ideas that he would later bring to Le Joc and Zanzibar. Back in Newark, Al was beginning to bring together the circle of people that would become the Le Joc family. In the early-'70s, Darryl introduced Al, who was living in the Weequahic section, to his friends from Weequahic High School—principally, Jamie McDonald, whose simple and elegant designs would gain him fame in Manhattan in the mid-'70s, and Tommy Garrett, who went on to become an international high-fashion model. They were part of the 1971 Weequahic class, and after they graduated they started to collaborate with Al on his fashion shows. The Weequahic section had its own burgeoning gay scene—Darryl jokingly recalls that the gay presence was so significant that some people referred to the section as "Homo Heights." One of the focal points of the scene coalescing around Al at that point, which would be about 1972, was an apartment at 19 Lyons Avenue that belonged to Marvin Davis and Larry Patterson, who were lovers at the time. So before there was a Club, there was 19 Lyons Avenue, where Marvin had the good grass and Larry had the music. Soon, Marvin, who was part of Newark's famous family of song (he was Dionne's cousin), and who was one of the most beautiful characters to ever walk the streets of Newark, was modeling in Al's shows, and Larry was doing the music. Somewhere around that time, Al got the idea for Le Joc and started trying to put together the money to pull it off, using the fashion shows to raise money. Marvin and Jamie would later become silent investors in Le Joc. But before there was Le Joc, there were Al's house parties. My favorite story is the "Christmas in July" theme party he threw at his mother's house on Bayview Avenue. Al taped over all the windows, put in black lights,

covered the floor with sawdust, and installed a mirrored ball on the ceiling. Upstairs there was a Christmas tree covered with lights, and outside there was Santa Claus passing out joints.

CREATING THE SURVIVAL TECHNOLOGY

The miracle of Zanzibar was that Al Murphy and Shelton Hayes figured out how to institutionalize the aesthetic. Their refined sensibility—the spreads of fruit, the theatricality, all the traces of the classic party art form—helped provide a life-affirming context for the development of black identity and self-determination. They created a new cultural memory self-determined outside commodified, "white" definitions. I know that some of my fondest memories of Newark in the eighties are those magical early morning moments when Tony would get inspired and play a set of classics, messing with the crossover until he reached a dreamworld awash in the sweet strains of some classic diva chorus. To be sure, the public character of the space meant that the intimacy and tranquility of Le Joc tended necessarily to get lost, since Zanzibar was always predominantly straight, but that was part of its appeal—Zanzibar was so great because it was a real dancers' club, a space where gay and straight rubbed up against each other and ended up producing nothing less than the sound of a city. I've been to almost all of the classic clubs, but there was no place like Zanzibar for the pure beauty of the dancing.

Unfortunately, there was also Zanzibar in the context of the Lincoln Motel, which by 1984 had turned into a grisly welfare hotel where young kids wandered aimlessly amidst all the vice with no gym, no playground, no nothing. The club, then, had a definite blue-black feeling; the joyful noise of soulful divas raising Cain was always just a few feet away from hell. Which helped ensure that the music stayed rooted in a very bluesy way and made the play between illusion and reality that went on inside the club all the more powerful. Whatever the exact configuration of causes is, Newark club definitely has a driven, devotional quality.

All of these different elements came together in the music of the generation that came up through the club. If you listen to Intense's "Let The Rain Come Down," for example, you can hear the gay/straight mix in a single phrase as Khison modulates from possessed falsetto to sober tenor: "I'm feelin' good and feelin' fine . . . Let the rain come down . . . When it's hot outside, yeah / And you want to cool your mind / Just step outside, 'cause when it rain it pours . . . Let's get happy in the rain." It's a melodic, Newark-gospel variation on the classic dreamworld of Chaka Khan's "Clouds" ("It's gonna rain down tears / Heartaches and fears"),



which is for me one of the quintessential club songs, one that powerfully evokes Albert Murray's idea of the dance floor as secular Temple wherein incantation is used to drive away the baleful spirits. Newark's greatest music in the eighties was tuneful and filled with song, lyrical and fine in sensibility, and filled with a spiritual yearning embedded in the black church. (Josh Milan, the keyboardist in Blaze, cites St. Paul's Fire Baptized Holiness Church as formative musical influence, to note just one example.) And not just yearning, but resolve, too, runs all through the music. There's a real spiritual concept of beauty at work here. It's very typical of Ace Mungin to say that he looks for music that he can "adore." As is the fact that the record for most appearances by an artist at Zanzibar is held by Alicia Myers, whose classic, "I Want To Thank You," is perhaps the loveliest dance-music ballad of all.

Tony Humphries was perhaps the seminal influence in the transition of club from its original disco roots into what became known as deep house, the song-based, singer-dominated sound that distinguished club in Newark from the elemental electronic sound of Chicago house. If you had to name one person who represented club as a popular form in Newark, it would have to be Tony. This is particularly true in two respects. One is the fact that Tony's masterful style of drumming was at the heart of what Zanzibar became for the dancers; the other is the fact that his radio show became the most influential club showcase in the New

York metropolitan area. Tapes of his mastermix show on KRS-FM became synonymous with quality club music. His reign as Zanzibar's regular jock, starting in late 1984, coincided with the transition from the classics to the second-generation club sound. And the importance of his radio show for breaking new records can't be overstated. Club has always been a 12-inch, independent-label format, and it was Tony's show that made it possible for independents to get exposure, since club has always been shunned by commercial radio. But these days, the disquieting question is, is club music dying out?

Whatever the future may hold in store, at least Newark club has achieved a sublime maturity on two early-'90s records, Blaze's hour-long album, *25 Years After*, conceived as a musical theater piece for CD, and the Voices of 6th Ave.'s "Call Him Up," a three-part, 27-minute devotional club/gospel hybrid. *25 Years After* envisions club as a tuneful, loving update of the socially conscious songs of Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, and EW&F. High-energy club grooves and shimmering ballads are linked together as narrative by the story of a Newark street criminal who transforms himself into a Muslim political activist. *25 Years After* is Newark club's deepest artistic statement, a kind of sublime dreamscape fusing black consciousness with a message of universal love and understanding, uniting the messages of Martin and Malcolm in a definitive club answer to Naughty By Nature's "Ghetto Bastard." Blaze could have gone for the money and produced a commercially driven sound. That they have deeper ambitions tells another kind of story about Newark. This same kind of integrity and vision can be heard on the Voices of 6th Ave.'s soul-stirring "Call Him Up," an all-star vocal jam on a churning gospel theme. Keyed by Tyrone Payton's inspired keyboard vamps and using an 18-voice club choir beautifully divided into male and female parts, "Call Him Up" bursts at the seams with church-drenched voices lifted up towards the heavens yet rooted in the tragedy of contemporary Newark; it's a sanctified proclamation of faith in the face of absurdity.

Whether or not these records turn out to be Newark club's swan songs, they will remain as loving reminders of a time when the melody refused to die. Which is something on my mind these days in light of the transformation of Zanzibar into one more crude teeny-bopper club. Al Murphy is gone forever, Shelton Hayes has been axed, Tony Humphries is somewhere in Europe. What's even worse is that club seems in danger of becoming an anachronism; it's hard not to think that the world has gotten too mean-spirited to support the club sensibility. And,

of course, AIDS has been devastating; as Greg Tate said of Chaka Khan, club is "a living reminder of the good times we thought would never end and all the good friends we'll never party with again, proof that once upon a time in America, dance-music, sex, and romance were synonymous."

It seems safe to say that the next generation will have nothing like the classic club tradition to grow up in. Newark still remains a center of club music, but if we look at John Robinson, the Club America jock who has a master-mix program on WBLS, for the state of the art, we see that the elongated flow motion of the classic sound has been fragmented and edited down in a way that seems sadly emblematic of the absence of song and melody in places like Newark these days. I went over to the Sound Factory Bar not long ago to check out Tony's last gig before he split for England and I was not encouraged. No one really dances together anymore. Now, gay guys *compete* with each other inside circles as a way of claiming public space. And then there was this emcee who came on and announced: "Let's hear it for Iron Mike Tyson in the house! All you sisters watch your asses, ha-ha."

An example of how far we've come from the club sensibility is this new Newark dance called the "lockitup," which is an acting out in dance of the ritual of carjacking (the title refers to the technique of locking the steering wheel in order to burn "doughnuts" into the street). There are even records that take the club beat and refract it through a dishearteningly crude sensibility. A prime example is this record by Johnny Dangerous, a young guy from Newark who comes out of Club America. It's called "I'll Beat That Bitch With A Bat!" Catchy little beat. I'm sorry to have to report it, but it does seem to say something about where we are. It opens with a classic kick-drum/ride-cymbal rhythm pattern, as the title is repeated sixty-seven times. After *that*, the lyric expands into a nightmarish adolescent-fear number. Using phrases like, "She never requests me," "her wicked ways" and "Allah increased her sickness," Johnny reaches for disco salvation in the theology of the Nation of Islam ("Final Call, all y'all"). The beat is entirely without resolution, very close to techno at one point. There is a nasty logic to the song in the way it mutilates a classic disco snippet—"I can't change"—before turning to a tape of Farrakhan telling us that we live in a country more "*freakish*" than Sodom and Gomorrah, telling us that the "Black man" is like a virgin impregnated by God with the seed of truth (i.e., Elijah Muhammed, the son of God). The "tune" climaxes with chants of "Conrad Muhammed" before signing off with a reprise of the title.



GARY JARDIM

Blue Coda: The Triumph of Jimmy Scott

Volume one of *Blue* ended with Jimmy poised on the verge of success. After a life filled with sadness and pain, he seemed ready to reclaim his position as one of America's great poets of song. Well, we are most happy to report that Jimmy has done it, and in glorious style. *All The Way*, his achingly beautiful, grammy-nominated 1992 album on Sire/Warner Brothers, is not only the record we were so fervently hoping for, it is a commercial success, and it has given Jimmy entrée to an international audience.

But it hasn't been easy. At the end of 1989, I wrote that a major record deal was imminent, but that proved to be a bit premature. We started to hear murmurs of interest coming out of the record industry, but Jimmy was still struggling to keep his head above water. In 1990, I heard second-hand, through someone at Warner Brothers, that Jimmy had signed a deal with Fantasy, the West-Coast record label. When I went over to Jimmy's apartment on Munn Avenue in East Orange, I congratulated him on his deal. "What deal?" was his response. Turned out that he had been offered a deal by a producer connected to Fantasy who had spread the rumor that he had signed Jimmy, in hopes of preventing anyone else from getting to him first. When I read the contract I realized why Jimmy hadn't signed it. It was a contract with the producer, not Fantasy, there was little up-front money, no guarantee of a record, and it gave the producer total control, including options on any subsequent records. Fortunately, Jimmy had the wisdom to turn it down.

Jimmy's first real break was his role in "Twin Peaks," David Lynch's bizarre TV series. Lynch had attended one of Jimmy's shows at the Ballroom during the 1989 engagement which was detailed in *Blue*. To Lynch's credit, he recognized the theatrical power of Jimmy's stage presence, and

he wrote him into the final episode's climactic dream sequence. It aired in June of 1991, and featured Jimmy, silhouetted against a blood-red curtain, moaning a lyric about sycamore trees, while a dwarf danced across the floor. It was strange, with definite freak-show trappings, but visually, it captured Jimmy's unearthly art, filling up the screen with Jimmy's face as he poured out his heart into a hand-held microphone, lights flashing on his face until it disappeared into nothingness.

But it wasn't until fate intervened that Jimmy finally got a record deal. In the last issue of *Blue*, I wrote of the songwriter Doc Pomus's tireless efforts to get a major-label deal for Jimmy. It took Doc's death to pull it off. Doc was one of those great American music stories—a disabled Jewish singer in love with jazz and rhythm & blues who goes on to write classic songs for, among others, the Drifters, Ray Charles, Elvis Presley, and Dion & the Belmonts. Doc eventually became a kind of conscience of the record industry, watching over neglected artists and constantly berating the industry for its cutthroat ways. When Big Joe Turner died, for example, it was Doc who made sure he had a decent burial and who embarrassed the record executives who got rich off Joe into paying off his hospital bills. Doc's two favorite singers were Joe Turner and Jimmy Scott. When Doc passed away in March of 1991, he left instructions for Jimmy to sing "Someone to Watch Over Me" during the funeral service, which was held at Riverside Chapel in Manhattan. The chapel was filled with big-time record industry people and the service included tributes from Ahmet Ertegun, Phil Spector, and Doc's buddy, Lou Reed, among others. Dr. John, another of Doc's buddies, accompanied Jimmy on the organ. Among those in the audience was Seymour Stein, one of the classic music-industry characters and current head of Sire records. After Jimmy's exquisite and haunting delivery of the lyric, he whispered, "We've got to record Jimmy."

Jimmy finally got his major-label deal in the summer of '91, and to Seymour's eternal credit, he went all out to give Jimmy a first-class setting. He brought in Tommy Lipuma, the masterful producer, who was on top of the charts with the Natalie Cole "Unforgettable" album, to produce; Joe McEwen, the black music scholar, to act as the A&R man; Johnny Mandel to write string arrangements; a pure-jazz trio of Kenny Barron, Ron Carter and Grady Tate to play the music; and David Newman for the saxophone solos. Jimmy took to it all like it was the most natural thing in the world. Chip Stern, in *Musician* magazine, called it "one of the most haunting vocal recitals you'll ever hear."

I went to the studio with Jimmy one day in January of 1992 when he

was putting the finishing touches on *All the Way*. He was real relaxed at home before we left, telling me about his plans to set up a studio so he could start holding singing classes for children, and of his hopes for an educational-cultural center in East Orange. I knew the record sessions were working out, because there was a calm, almost serene air about him. Henrietta Parker, the noted Newark producer, was acting as Jimmy's manager at the time and she drove us over to Manhattan. That was an interesting trip, Henrietta recounting for me the last days of her friend James Brown, the beloved librarian at the Newark Library, who had succumbed to the virus several months before. She told us how James battled the pain and the opportunistic infections. And she wondered about the sparsely-attended funeral. "Do you really think it's because people have a problem with AIDS, Gary?"

As we got comfortable in the waiting room at the studio, I pulled out my copy of the *Star-Ledger* and read about the spree of eight shootings that had taken place in Newark the previous week. "Jimmy, didn't somebody get shot and killed the other night on South Munn?" "Yeah. Right out there on the corner. I heard it." Those wanting to know the social context of *All the Way* should note that for the last two years, Jimmy Scott has had to walk through a 24-hour crack scene to get in his apartment building. But in the studio everything was easy and focused. Lipuma proved to be gracious and savvy, and very respectful of Jimmy—"Come in here, Jimmy, so you can be involved in the process." He was sensitive to the subtleties of how Jimmy works, too, letting him sing whole songs instead of trying to punch in isolated phrases—"So we can get a flow going." Watching them work on Jimmy's chilling rendition of "Street of Dreams" for the *Glengarry Glen Ross* soundtrack album, I began to understand what a brilliant pair of ears Tommy has as he punched in seamless edits, which is no easy task, considering Jimmy's ever-changing phrasing. "That's what I love about you, man. I know I'm never gonna get the same thing twice."

Recording the album was a victorious moment for Jimmy and he carried it off with the elusive nonchalance of the blues hipster that he is. Listening to him as he sat in front of the microphone that day evoked the languor of a mild southern breeze. It comes across on the album, which has the wisdom and grace of an old master; his beguiling personalization of the lyric touches us in the most intimate places.

All the Way reached number four on the *Billboard* jazz chart and it's opened up a whole new world for Jimmy. He's gotten rave reviews from critics in almost all the major music publications. *Downbeat* featured a five-

star review and called him "one of the great jazz singers, fully worthy of comparison with Dinah Washington or Betty Carter." Jimmy has become a star outside the jazz world, too. Lou Reed featured him on his tribute album to Doc Pomus. Fred Schneider of the B-52's says, "Jimmy Scott is unreal." Flea, the bassist in the Red Hot Chili Peppers, says "My man's voice is a haunting angel that floats down from outer space and takes me to where it came from." Even *The New Yorker* did a feature on him. He's been to Europe several times (once to sing with Quincy Jones' band at Montreux), toured Japan, and been all across the U.S. He has gigs booked through all of this year, from Paris to Australia. He's got big-time management, a top booking agent, and he's at the top of his form as a singer. Even Liz Smith, the gossip columnist, was bowled over by Jimmy's triumphant world-class nightclub show at the Bottom Line, in October of '92, devoting three full paragraphs in one of her columns: "Something amazing happened at New York's Bottom Line this week—Jimmy Scott. . . . His voice is one of the great mesmerizing instruments of contemporary music. . . . Scott's diction, clarity, dramatic presentation and emotional commitment in the depths of song seem to meld Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Judy Garland, and Nancy Wilson." To top it all off, Rhino Records has just issued *Lost and Found*, a collection of the best of *The Source*, as well as never-before released songs recorded in 1972 for Atlantic which rank among the best work Jimmy has ever done.

Jimmy has taken well to his success, but he hasn't lost his loyalty to the people who stuck with him through the lean years. He's set up an office at Symphony Hall, and he recently started an ambitious series at the Terrace Ballroom, called "The Infancy of Jazz," as a way of providing a showcase for older performers trying to keep their art alive. Jimmy is on the world stage now, but you can find him on the second floor of the mostly-unused Symphony Hall, sitting in a small office which is surrounded by empty rooms and discarded building material.

Newark and the Rhetoric of Optimism

The city's pre-eminent historian, Clement Alexander Price, analyzes twentieth-century Newark and considers the effects of modern life, race, suburbanization, governmental policy and local politics on the urban experience.

The Myth of the Renaissance City

Gary Jardim on the ramifications of Newark's long-standing economic depression and collapsing job base, and the unfulfilled promise of black politics.

Sang Pruitt

Three children struggling to survive on Newark's mean streets. The opening chapter from a novel-in-progress by Nathan C. Heard.

The Life and Art of Nathan C. Heard

The amazing and inspiring story of Newark's great novelist. An in-depth conversation on his life, his writing, and how he became a writer in prison. The definitive interview.

A Certain Style of Rage: Amiri Baraka in the '90s

A provocative essay on the renegade behind the mask.

An Oral History of Club Music

Kevin Hedge, Ace Mungin and Shelton Hayes recount how disco's elegant and humane groove took root as popular style in Newark and flowered into the sound of the city during the 1980s. Includes a selected discography.

Albert Murphy and the Club Music Aesthetic

The story of how Newark's poet of style transformed the idea of the house party into an art form.

The Triumph of Jimmy Scott

How America's deepest ballad singer finally got over.

Praise for Volume One of

BLUE

"A memorable publication . . . The interview with Dr. Clement Price offers a searing analysis of twentieth-century Newark and its African-American population. It blends well with the powerful fiction by Nathan C. Heard, and with evocative accounts of the glories and tragedies of Newark singers Little Jimmy Scott and Big Maybelle. Like Jardim's interview with Price, the rest of the book is both poignant and perceptive."

—George Hawley, Supervising Librarian,
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"Nathan C. Heard . . . is a nightmarish Faulkner of the American ghetto . . . a unique dexterity in handling the idiom of the modern black ghetto . . . there are very few, if any, writers in the entire country who can handle the continuously evolving dialect of blacks with Heard's accuracy and facility."

—Claude Brown

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